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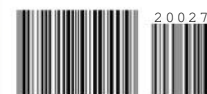
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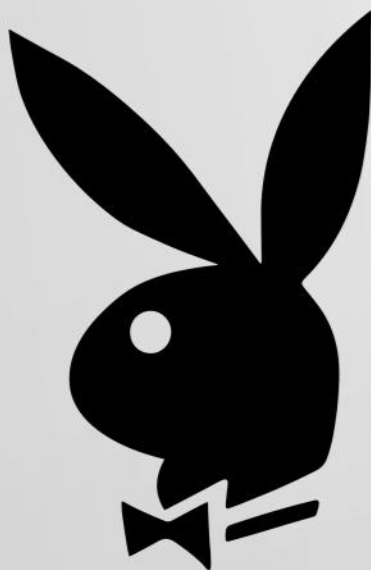
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PLAYBOY



*Killer Art for
a Good Cause:*
**Swoon's Helio-
trope Founda-
tion is a Holiday
Gifting Miracle**



The socially-minded artist makes a splash with her latest project, the Heliotrope Foundation—a nonprofit using fine art to finance community relief

BY LIZ SUMAN

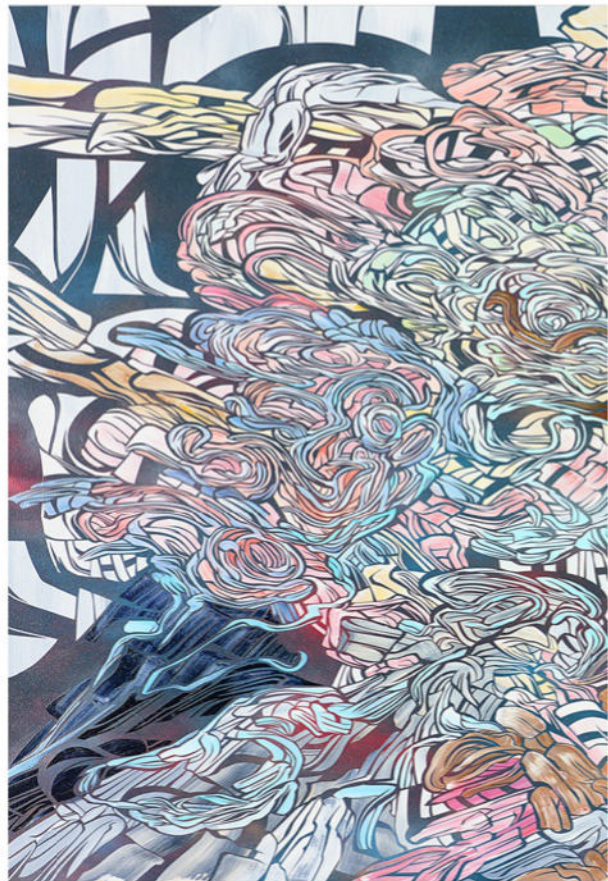
IMAGE COURTESY **HELIOTROPE FOUNDATION**



Zaria Forman; image courtesy of the Heliotrope Foundation

Caledonia “Swoon” Curry has always taken an interdisciplinary, humanist approach to her creations, and her latest project is no different. The street-art darling’s nonprofit, the Heliotrope Foundation, has tapped more than 95 artists to create affordable fine-art prints for a fundraising initiative conceived to help communities recover from natural disasters and social crises.

One hundred percent of proceeds from the hand-numbered, limited edition “Heliotrope Prints,” which go for \$925.00 a pop and feature work by Kenny Scharf, Jean Jullien, Molly Crabapple, Shepard Fairey, Ricky Powell, Olek, Swoon and others, benefit post-earthquake Haiti, New Orleans and the Rust Belt town of Braddock, Pennsylvania.



"Inner Workings" by Emilio Perez; image courtesy of the Heliotrope Foundation

Swoon, a Brooklyn-based mixed media artist and Jeffrey Deitch mentee, helped elevate street art to new levels of technique and originality by peppering New York City with intricate life-size paper cuts and hand-pulled block prints of people she knows. She released the first installment of the prints in 2012 as an extension of the arts-based community relationships she's cultivated throughout

her career.

Swoon says the response from her contemporaries was unexpectedly positive. "Lots of artists started coming out of the woodwork offering to contribute in some way," she says. "It made me understand that the same impulse that urged me to create this kind of project in the first place was very much alive in my fellow artists,



"KNOT" by Rashaad Newsome; image courtesy of the Heliotrope Foundation



David Cook; image courtesy of the Heliotrope Foundation

no matter their medium or methodology."

The response was so positive, in fact, that Swoon needed an entire nonprofit to streamline and finance her various creative philanthropic efforts. "Our work in Haiti, New Orleans and Braddock evolved to a scale where we had structured goals that needed major fundraising," she explains. "That moment was the basis of the Heliotrope Foundation's inception."

Heliotrope's artist roster has grown exponentially ever since, and now the whimsical wheat-paster best known for populating public spaces with imaginary worlds of paper people is using art to benefit real people on a global scale.

The impact has been multifaceted. "Heliotrope Prints has become a platform where artists can contribute to meaningful outcomes of Heliotrope Foundation projects," says Swoon. At the same time, she adds, "the community has uniquely affordable access to appreciate these artists' work on their walls."

This year's batch of exclusive prints, curated by Molly Krause and out this month, features Rashaad Newsome, Ebony G. Patterson, Kenny Scharf, Aidan Koch, Emilio Perez and Anne Spalter.



Jean Jullien; image courtesy of the Heliotrope Foundation



Image courtesy of the Heliotrope Foundation





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We're happy to have you featured. Can you give us a bit of background on your career as a model and where it all started? This really marks my starting point as a model. Modeling is something I have always been interested in, but never really pursued. I've always imagined being featured in Playboy, so this is a dream come true.

How do you usually begin your day? My pets are my babies and they have so much personality. My mornings can be a bit hectic as they are all competing for my attention and waiting to be fed. I actually cook their food every morning because I want them to be as healthy as possible.

If you could spend a day doing anything you wanted, what would it be and why? The most important thing isn't the journey or the destination... It's the company. As long as I'm surrounded by those I love, I am exactly where I should be and I'm happy.

What are your favorite ways to unwind and relax when you're not working or traveling? I love sports. Whether it's shooting hoops or catching a game at Wrigley Field, I've always been a sporty girl and sports is a huge part of my life. My dog is even named after Tom Brady.

Do you have any hidden talent, if so what is it? OMG, okay... I consider myself a master air musician. Air guitar, air drums, air piano... even air cowbell.

What's the best place you have ever been to in the world? This is so hard to choose because I have traveled a lot. But if I have to choose, there is something about Paris.

What are some of your biggest dreams you hope to achieve? Food is my passion! I love how food brings people together. I definitely get my love of food from my dad and I would love to become a chef. Everything I cook is completely from scratch and I really have fun doing it.

3 things that you can't go a day without. Laughter, love, and Cheetos (my guilty pleasure).

Looking back, what advice would you give to younger yourself? Having integrity is everything to me. We all face ad-



versity, but it's how you handle it. I would tell myself as I grow and make mistakes, always be honest because it's not the mistakes you make that hurt the ones you love, it's how you handle it.

That said, what advice would you give to all the women out there when it comes to love and relationships? There are so many qualities that are important for a successful relationship. Trust, passion, sexual connection. But I think respect is super important. To respect your man and to understand roles in a relationship cannot be understated. When a man knows he's valued and respected, it's going to go

a long way.

Are there any qualities or traits you find particularly attractive in a partner and what do you value the most? I like a man who is strong, confident, even dominant. Intelligence is a major turn-on for me and of course, he has to make me laugh.

Thanks so much for your time, Where can our readers follow you on social to stay up to date on what you're up to? I've never really been big on social media, this is all very new to me! My advice is to put your phones down, take a break from social media and go outside.





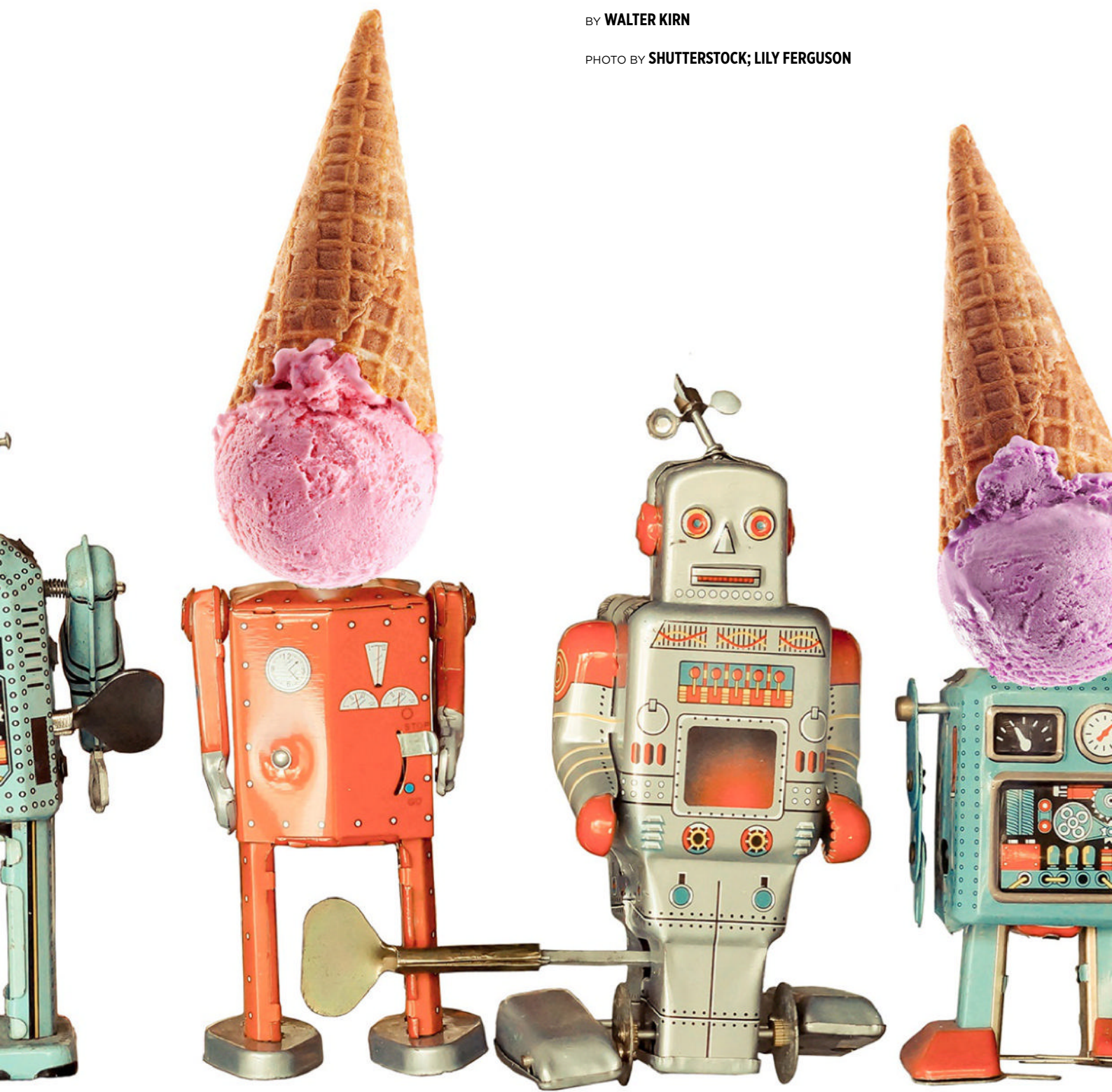
Playboy Fiction

Finishing



BY **WALTER KIRN**

PHOTO BY **SHUTTERSTOCK; LILY FERGUSON**



A delicious tale of robots, sex and ice cream

Serving ice cream to sunburned young families was the first job that Tyson Millner lost to a machine. It was shaped like a fat, upright lobster, and had five arms. It was there one morning behind the counter, illuminated by a special track light, when he showed up for his shift. Mrs. Huggard, his boss, the shop's owner, called it "Lenny" after a character in a book she loved. It had some remarkable abilities. It could guess people's orders before they placed them based on what they'd ordered in the past and was programmed to tease them with corny quips. If a girl liked pecans on her sundaes, it might say, retrieving her name from its perfect memory, "You're nuts for nuts, Luanne!" Or, if she wanted bananas, "You've gone bananas!" These wise-cracks never failed to bring on squeals, even from children who'd heard them many times.

Also thrilling to them was Lenny's physical manner, which was that of an overburdened juggler continually on the verge of flubbing up. Simulating rising panic, its articulated, claw-tipped arms would speed up crazily, threatening disaster, as they dispensed candy sprinkles and caramel sauce, blended milk shakes and built top-heavy cones that it pretended were too tall to hold and yet, despite much mock bobbling, never dropped.

Tyson too found Lenny charming—at first. They were partners, the way he saw it, a comic duo. He helped with tasks that Lenny couldn't manage, such as clearing clogged syrup spouts, handling paper money (Lenny could only process cards) and topping off sundaes with a glossy cherry perched on a frilly squirt of canned whipped cream. This cherry business, with Tyson at the ready, suspending the piece of fruit above the bowl as fake-fumbling Lenny assembled the confection, grew into their most popular routine. Another act that delighted the little ones consisted of Tyson standing at Lenny's "shoulder" watching his movements and wielding a small wrench as though prepared to swoop in and readjust him, or maybe deactivate him, should he screw up. But Lenny never screwed up. In fact, he kept improving, endowed by his manufacturer with the ability to observe and refine his own behavior. Someday he might even learn to place a cherry, dimpling it into the cream so it stayed put.

Within a few weeks of Lenny's installation, traffic at the shop had nearly doubled, and Tyson decided to ask a second time for the raise he'd been expecting. His wage, he'd understood when he was hired, was preliminary, probationary, and supposed to go up automatically after a month or two. When this didn't happen, Tyson started grouching about unforeseen expenses in his life, from the need to replace the bald tires on his truck to a surge in the price of Clarifex, a drug that calmed his raging acne. Mrs. Huggard responded with grumbles of her own. A pack rat had died in a drainpipe in the wall of the apartment building she owned next door, causing a leak that soaked into the Sheetrock and spawned a bloom of toxic mold. She had

to hire a licensed abatement firm at over R2,750.00 an hour. But even worse, she let him know, tourism was down throughout the region thanks to hysterical media reports concerning a rare but deadly tick-borne virus local to southern Utah's red rock hills. Sensitive to her troubles, Tyson backed off, but when Lenny appeared and worked his miracle, attracting new customers from throughout the area even as fall approached and the weather cooled, he decided his demands were not unreasonable.

He approached his boss in her office behind the shop at the end of a Thursday, the day she did her books. Surrounded by her collection of witty mugs—Same Old Shit, Different Day, The Best Man for the Job Is Usually a Woman, etc.—she was filling out a spreadsheet on her computer. Mrs. Huggard had a bitter streak. The rumor was she'd been the longtime mistress of a married U.S. congressman who'd found religion during a close election and bought her silence with a large lump sum that she'd used to start the shop. To Tyson, she looked like a loving soul defeated, a merry spirit curdled by worldly hurts. Her gray-green eyes were permanently narrowed and her hair was a perfect blonde fury, set and sprayed, rigid enough to cage a little bird. She lived in the top rear unit of her building, where Tyson had once helped a mover deliver a dryer. Her furniture was brown leather, like a man's, and through the open doorway of her bedroom he glimpsed an old poster of a movie cowboy blasting away with a lever-action rifle. The only touch of softness in the place was an odd little altar on a window seat consisting of candles and amethysts and sage leaves arranged in a crescent around a bright gold coin. "Prosperity magic," she answered when he asked. "The sun streams in and activates a vortex."

Tyson stood by her desk and made his pitch while she leaned back in her new hydraulic chair, her elbows resting on its arms and her fingertips in a steeple under her chin. He reminded her of the promises she made when she hired him off an online bulletin board maintained by a state-run service for at-risk teens. Youth Horizons, a boot-camp-like program in the desert that he'd been sentenced to by a lady judge after calling in a bomb threat to his school on a day when he couldn't bear for his few friends to see the volcanic pimples on his face, was the cruelest sum-

Tyson had been consoled this way before, mostly by church girls, those experts at snaky praise.

mer of his life. On the very first night a camp mate snatched his Ritalin, forcing him to undergo withdrawal while enduring a cycle of freezing predawn showers, barefoot five-mile runs, marathon computer-coding classes and trust-building leaps from a tower behind the barracks into other campers' outstretched arms. The counselors told them the idea was to break them down and then rebuild them, but the program ended before phase two was done.

"You told me you'd bump me up after a month," he said. "I just had to prove to you I didn't steal. Well, I didn't. I haven't."

"You're reformed."

"I'm honest and punctual, is what I am."

"Not to mention immaculately groomed."

Tyson's right hand floated up and touched his forehead, a reflex when someone mentioned his appearance.

"Don't pick," she said. "It won't heal if you keep picking. And that would be a shame, because you're handsome. Fundamentally. Under all the rough stuff."

Tyson had been consoled this way before, mostly by church girls, those experts at snaky praise. Their compliments, if you took them in, settled inside your system like spoiled food, producing pangs and churns and aches. It was better to be called ugly and bleed cleanly. That could be bandaged, dealt with by first aid.

Tyson pressed ahead. In case Mrs. Huggard hadn't listened last time, he described his circumstances to her. His landlord, his aunt, was on mobile dialysis, with no other income besides the rent he paid her. As a Mormon, one tenth of his income was the Church's. Most important, though, he was the sole responsible male in the life of a young single mother, his cousin Kylee, whose three-year-old son had developmental challenges that called for psychology checkups in Salt Lake City and kept her from working outside the home. He didn't support his cousin—she got church welfare—but his occasional loans and gifts bridged her worst shortfalls and wardrobe needs, letting her focus on being a good mom.

"That's all deeply stirring," Mrs. Huggard said, "but your pay should reflect your performance, not your problems. The truth is, it's Lenny who deserves a raise."

"He can't even put the cherries on," said Tyson.

"Maybe we don't need cherries. Do people eat them?"

"They're the finishing touch. They're traditional."

"They're wasteful. Nobody eats them. I see them in the trash."

"They're expected," said Tyson.

"They're barbershop quartets. Used to seem cheerful. No one quite knows why."

Before Tyson could argue his point further, Mrs. Huggard cut his schedule. She informed him that the shop would close on Mondays so Lenny could be serviced, tuned and cleaned by the company she leased him from. She suggested that Tyson, if he were "future positive," might want to learn to perform such work himself. She offered to ask the company's mobile tech team, which was based in Las Vegas and worked out of a van equipped with costly electronic tools, to let him stop in and observe its work on Mondays. He could think of it as an unpaid internship.

"I don't think so. No interest," said Tyson. He loathed computers. He even disliked his phone. Youth Horizons had

drilled him in a gospel of tripling and quadrupling opportunities for anyone able to size a digital photo or group all his passwords under one super-password, but then why were the people who taught these skills so grim? Why were they herding delinquents through the desert, not cruising eight miles above it wearing headphones? And this was the sick part: According to one counselor, the day was approaching when most computer work would be performed by other computers. Then what? It's why when Kylee felt all cooped up that one time and begged him to pay for an online graphic design course, he bought her a stationary bike instead.

"I ought to go back and close up and clear the till," he said. "I left him all alone in there."

Mrs. Huggard raised an index finger as if inviting him to witness something. She swiveled around in her chair and tapped her keyboard, calling up a screen on her big desktop that showed a split view from the security cameras: the front door on the right, the counter on the left. The door had been shut, its latching crossbar lowered and its one-way reflective sun-curtain pulled down. But that was not the sight that startled Tyson. Standing at the counter near the cash drawer and casting a crisp dark shadow on the white tiles, Lenny was rapidly counting the day's take and stacking the bills and coins with all five claws.

"You know how he mastered that?" Mrs. Huggard said.

Tyson didn't, and wasn't about to guess.

"By patient observation. By watching you."

He fasted on Sunday. He fasted once a month on the schedule set down by the Church, the chief source of structure in his life since Youth Horizons had broken him down and only partially rebuilt him. His Mormon faith confused him for the most part, particularly its ideas about the afterlife, when risen souls would inherit their own planets and reign over them as God reigns over ours, but there was one doctrine that made sense to him: pre-existence. Before we were born, according to this teaching, we chose our lives to come, from the people who would become our friends and families to the most crucial challenges we'd face. That's why no problems on earth were insurmountable; we'd already solved them in our prior state. The trick was retrieving these answers through the veil, which was where fasting came in. It quickened thought.

Like most businesses in Cedar City, the ice cream shop was closed on Sundays, but Tyson felt prompted to drive there after church on his way to Kylee's place, where he'd promised to watch his nephew while she cleaned. He parked his truck across the street and watched the sunshine baste the wide front window. He pictured Lenny locked in the back room, shrouded in the bluish plastic sheet that shielded him

from dust. Tyson wished he could spend some time alone with him, if only so they could banter about nothing using the goofy scripts in Lenny's memory. "Oh fudge, we're out of chocolate!" "Willya grab some vanilla from the chilla?" At work, with Mrs. Huggard spying on them through the security portal on her desktop, they only pretended to have fun, but underneath the mood was pressured, tense. It led to mistakes, at least on Tyson's part. Just yesterday he'd dumped a tall parfait that Lenny had spent five minutes layering, bringing tears to the eyes of a patient birthday girl, who turned to her father and wailed, "My special treat!" Lenny promptly started a new parfait, but when it came time to hand it off to Tyson so he could light the pink candle on the top while singing "Happy Birthday," her father barged in and grabbed it straight from Lenny.

As Tyson sat parked in his truck he saw a cop car nose out of an alley onto Smith Street and turn in his direction, moving slowly. He recognized the officer, a man who'd given him trouble in the past, pulling him over for nothing, just to "chat," no doubt aware of Tyson's tainted status as a level-six offender. Though his stint at Youth Horizons had automatically wiped his record when he'd turned 18 last winter, the authorities seemed determined to toy with him, perhaps still angry about the stir he'd caused by making the bomb threat in a foreign accent. They tracked him to his aunt's within 10 minutes, panicking neighbors up and down the block by thundering in in an armored SUV, wearing black paramilitary-style jumpsuits and brandishing laser-scoped long guns, not stubby sidearms. His aunt, unaware of the sneaky call he'd placed, was docked with her mobile dialysis machine when the killer elite burst through the door. She fainted in her lounge chair. Tyson, wrapped in a towel, fresh from the shower, was handcuffed in minus seven seconds, his shoulders cranked back in their sockets, about to pop. Worse, the towel had fallen to his ankles and the commotion had made his penis hard, a condition he tried to will away but couldn't.

Finding work after all of that had not been simple. He didn't want to have to search again.

The police car rolled past and Tyson drove away, obeying the speed limit, signaling his turns. He entered Kylee's subdivision, a hive of noodle-shaped streets and cul-de-sacs lined by desert-tan three-story houses whose residents couldn't cover their basic monthlies, forcing a lot of them to rent rooms to strangers. Kylee lived in a basement whose owner had set it up as a huge media room originally, with sectional sofas and a vast TV that covered one wall like a window into hell. Tyson found her there watching a movie with little Taylor, who was standing

The authorities
were perhaps still
angry about the
stir he'd caused by
making a bomb
threat.

enclosed in a waist-high plastic cart that scooted around on gritty, scratchy wheels and featured various toys on springy stalks, including a dangling yellow microphone. The gadget worked. It amplified his voice, filling the room with booming babbles that Kylee, a nervous type, guiltily interpreted as orders.

"I'm getting your Cheerios. Promise. Hang on," she said.

Tyson said, "Go do your laundry. Let me have him." His theory of Taylor was that his talk was nonsense, just bubbles of sound-feeling bursting in the air, meaning Kylee was scrambling his progress toward working speech by attaching specific rewards to random blabs.

"He's trying to tell us he wants a snack," said Kylee.

"He's got a snack. What's that?" Tyson pointed to the gray bologna strips strewn on a tray that clipped onto the cart. "He's fine. Do your wash. We're going to read a book."

"He tore all the pages out. He wrecked his book."

"Kids need multiple books. That's pathetic. One book? That's wrong."

"We live a sad life in our enormous basement."

"I'll make up a story for him. Go away." This was why he hadn't moved away to work in Salt Lake or Las Vegas, the way his friends had. There was a mind at stake. A tiny mind.

The story he told tumbled out already formed, a tale of deception and enchantment that must have been a product of his fast, since nothing about it seemed to come from him; he wondered if he'd seen it in a movie or had it read to him by a babysitter, perhaps that old Basque lady who'd nursed his aunt. The setting was a gloomy mountain cavern, the throne room of a lonesome queen who'd plucked out her own eyes as a young maiden after glimpsing the

man she loved passionately kissing her lovely sister. In her court were two elves that competed for her favor by fashioning elaborate jeweled crowns whose beauty the queen could only take on faith, by listening to the elves' descriptions of them. The cleverer elf, who was also the lazy one, eventually realized that the crowns themselves—whose brilliant gemstones could be obtained only by digging in a deep and narrow mine—were unimportant compared to the fine words required to rouse the queen's imagination. Instead of toiling in the far-off mine, he crafted his crowns from homely pebbles and fixed his attention on learning fancy speech. This trickery enraged the second elf. He responded by digging deeper into the mine in search of brighter, larger gems, which he described to the queen in honest terms, along with the splendid crowns he made from them. This contest went on for many years, the clever elf growing grander in his language, the simple elf weakening from his taxing labors. Finally, on her deathbed, the queen announced that her kingdom would pass to the greater of the two craftsmen, but rather than judge the matter herself, she would call upon her chief wizard, whose eyes were keen, to rank their workmanship. The simple elf rejoiced on hearing this, confident in his achievements, while the clever elf panicked and, fearing the wizard's approach, raised his fists and beat the simple elf, who died in the battle, too weary to fight back.

"A curse on you," came the voice of the wise wizard, who'd witnessed the conflict while floating in the air. "You need not have slain the poor creature, for you, my elf, were truly the best jeweler. Your rival turned rubies into crowns, but you, with your tongue, turned gravel into rubies."

Tyson's nephew, hot and small and damp, had curled up against him and gone to sleep. Tyson realized he'd told the story with his eyes closed, bobbing along in a cloudy purple dreamscape. When he opened his eyes and reentered the hard world, he smelled a pizza baking, cheese and sausage, and a spike of pure animal hunger drenched his mouth. He could eat now; the fast had succeeded. He'd broken through. He knew what to do. Not precisely, not in detail, but as a direction, a course across a map.

"If you'd just asked me, dummy," Kylee said after he'd presented his ideas, "I would have told you the same thing. The way you describe this, it's your only move."

But a vision was so much better than advice.

According to the videos and websites that Tyson studied after work that week, gaining control of a woman, seducing her, had little to do with gentleness and kindness. Though women admired these qualities in theory, their real-life behavior, true pickup artists knew, revealed a preference for boastful, taunting jerks. Appearance? At-

tractiveness? Neither was essential. What mattered was keeping her doubtful and off-balance. What worked was leverage, and what was leverage? Fear.

Tyson's first move with Mrs. Huggard was to start calling her "Carol" around the shop. She didn't correct him, though he could see it rocked her; her hands went right to her body every time, smoothing her shirt or the hips of her brown slacks. The name seemed to put them on a different footing, elevating his and dropping hers, even, in some way, narrowing their age gap. She was 40, give or take a year. Tyson learned this by turning off the soft-rock radio station that played during work hours, per her standing order, and switching to an urban station. "They're depressing, those 1960s songs," he said. "All that high warbling makes me want to die. Sorry you had to grow up with that."

"I didn't. That last song—performed by the gifted Whitney Houston, if pop culture history interests you at all—was the number one hit in 1993, my senior year in high school."

"Back in some farm state, you told me. Indiana?"

"Go Hoosiers!" Lenny barked, idling off to the side near the steel sink. His updated customer-service software plug-in cross-referenced the names of states and cities with a list of pro and college sports teams. Tourists loved it. They couldn't get enough. They ran down long rosters of places, testing him.

"Minnesota," Mrs. Huggard said.

"Go Twins. Go Vikings."

"Question for you, Carol," Tyson said. "And I need you to answer honestly. And think." He was leaning against the freezer, ankles crossed, his thumbs hooked inside the cloth belt that cinched his apron. His shirtsleeves, which he'd always worn rolled down to hide the muddy amateur tattoo he'd given himself at Youth Horizons (Scorpio the scorpion, his sun sign, inside a ring of fire), were pushed up as far as they'd go, around his biceps. More skin showed inside his open collar, which also revealed a nickel chain formed from hammered, medieval-looking links. He'd bought it at a fair but never worn it, concerned that it might draw attention to the war zone of pitted pink scars on his throat and lower jaw. The pickup videos allayed this qualm. Concealing your flaws was a weak, evasive move that conveyed degraded mating status to the primal female brain. The power move, which required a rewiring of the shame-warped modern male nervous system, was to showcase your flaws, to stick them right up front.

"If I'm buying my girlfriend a hot new dress—on sale; that's important, a dress I can't take back—but I don't know her size and I don't want to ask her because asking would ruin the surprise, should I estimate down and risk



buying one too small—if so, I’ve blown a ton of money; it might be a sale dress, but it’s still not cheap—or, to be safe, do I buy a larger size?”

“Except you don’t have a girlfriend,” said Mrs. Huggard. “Or has that changed? It might explain some things.”

“The question is purely hypothetical.”

“Let’s pray I caught it all. It stretched.”

“I’ll gladly repeat it.”

“Hush. I’m concentrating.”

“I’m hoping you’re storing this, Lenny,” Tyson said. “This might be your first true insight into Carol. That question I asked her, you’re going to see, is like an X-ray of her personality.” Tyson was improvising here, patching a crack in his routine. In the video lessons, the model pickup artist had a buddy, a so-called wingman, who pumped up his image and created drama. He might mention that they were late for a cool party, say, or whisper to the target woman that the pickup artist’s desperate ex was lurking across the room.

“Too small,” Mrs. Huggard said. She seemed distracted; she kept casting glances at the office door where she’d been headed when Tyson waylaid her. Or perhaps she was miffed that a mother with plump twin boys had paused at the window just then and peered inside—intently, with her hands shading her eyes—and then moved along in the way some parents did when they couldn’t immediately spot the magical mechanized server they’d heard about.

“That tells me a lot about you. ‘Too small,’” said Tyson, determined to play out the whole bit. It had taken him almost two hours to memorize because it called for different lines depending not only on the woman’s answers but also on her posture and body language and whether she was alone or in a group. What’s more, the script’s potency wasn’t in the words so much as in the gazes, gestures, breaths and other carefully planted hypnotic cues that led the woman, almost despite her will, to crave your attention and approval. Was it working with Carol? He’d soon see.

“What it tells me,” he said, “is that you’re vain. You worry about your looks, your weight, your shape. It also tells me you hope I like your shape. As my imaginary girlfriend, a role you unconsciously fell into there, you’re eager for me, your imaginary boyfriend, to perceive you as slim and trim. You’d be crushed if I bought the larger size. You’d fear I thought that you were fat, particularly if you are a little fat.”

“Brief time-out. Excuse me. People keep peeking in, then walking off.” Mrs. Huggard double-clapped her hands, the signal for Lenny’s motor to engage. “Command. Reposition. Front window, center right.” Lenny rolled toward his post with a high, thin, oiled purr. After a series of sensor-driven stutters and minute telescopic height adjustments, he stopped in a panel of sunlight and faced the street, his arms folded up at all three articulations, his claws retracted and fully sheathed.

“Go on. Your psychology test,” said Mrs. Huggard. She opened her stance some and cocked her head—good

signs.

“That’s it. That’s all,” said Tyson. “Though I was thinking: After work some night, maybe I could stop by at your apartment? To talk or whatever. Maybe watch a movie. You probably have great cable. I don’t have any.”

“A movie? At my place?”

“Or maybe not. Whatever. It was just an idea.” Error. Error. Once you’d leaned in, you didn’t lean back. You either withdrew all interest, baffling her, or leaned in further, going for the close. His eyes floated down to his shoes, another lapse, then wandered over to Lenny, so still, so solemn. Between tasks, between customers, he barely existed. Sometimes it was hard to remember he was the enemy.

“We could do it tonight if you’re free. And up to it.”

Mrs. Huggard had opened her stance up even further, and soon, if the models were correct, she would touch her neck or breastbone. There: the breastbone. Tyson felt rushed. They’d skipped a step somehow, he wasn’t sure which one, but the websites were clear: He should square his shoulders now and slacken his mouth a bit.

“If my friend is in town, I’ll grab a little dope.” Elongated stage pause. “Said Carol.”

“This just got interesting.”

“It always was. You just never seemed to notice.”

“Carol said to Tyson.”

“Said Mr. Millner.”

The TV set, mounted on a wall, was small for this decade and miles from the couch, so they sat on a checked red blanket, picnic style, and watched the movie from the floor. She mixed cocktails in an empty saucepan and served them in mismatched stoneware mugs. He noticed her kitchen was pitifully equipped and that there was not a plant in the whole place, just a sand-filled clay flowerpot on a low bookcase with three foil pinwheels standing in the sand. She chain-smoked menthol cigarettes. The clouds she blew caught beams of blue TV light as she talked back to the movie, guessing characters’ lines before they spoke them, ridiculing weak points in the plot and specifying the camera shots (“Zoom in,” “Track back,” “Fade out”). Her ashtray was a Coke can with Coke in it; lit butts inserted in the hole hissed and sizzled. She said money belonged in the bank, not in the house. She voted Republican, thought Democratic and lived Libertarian, she said, and then she explained what this meant; he didn’t know politics. Their first physical contact was when she slapped his thigh, playfully but with stinging force, during a courtship scene she found absurd because the woman didn’t seem to mind being pushed down by the man into a snowbank. He caught inklings of Mrs. Huggard, bursts of Carol and waves of a third being who contained them both and seemed to have whirled up out of a brass lamp. She wore gym shorts, a green, spangled blouse thing and no bra, her breasts bobbing like rubber bath toys. That she’d chosen to dwell and do business among Mormons made no sense to him, although maybe she lived for close

They sat on the bed
beneath the cowboy
poster, unzipping
and unhooking. He
wanted to thrill her.

getaways, quick-changes. She apologized for not finding any dope but said she'd brewed tea from cloves and magic mushrooms and spiked it with lemon vodka to make their drinks.

"So why this weird new you?" she said, asking him what he'd been meaning to ask her. "All shitty and cute and party with the boss?"

"I'm not sure I know. I'm 18. I try things out."

"When I was 18 things tried me out."

"Do you mean guys?"

"More like forces. Approaches. Ideas. Schools of thought." She drank some spiked tea and then peered into her cup as though she'd spotted a bug, a hair, her fortune. "You're right, though. They usually took the form of guys."

They sat. Nothing happened. They were just together. She poked a butt into the Coke can hole and up came a twisty braid of silver smoke that she blew on and separated into strands. It was possible that he loved her, or soon would. Her hair, with the spray gone, fell straight and smelled like pencils. He wanted to thrill her, suspecting few ever had. He didn't care about her thrilling him because calming down enough for that to happen seemed impossible tonight.

They sat on the bed beneath the cowboy poster, unzipping and unhooking. She took the lead but then he took it back, pushing her down. "You have instincts. Good," she said. He kneed her legs apart and used his hand on her, though possibly too scientifically at first, because she soon took control of it with her hand and moved it more crudely, with over twice the pressure, which made him feel rebuked. He bent down to kiss her but she turned her head, so he chewed on her ear. She seemed unmoved. She lifted his hand off and said, "We had a rhythm there but now it's like we're scrubbing a pot. Plan B." He interpreted this as a request to use his mouth, and indeed she reached behind his head and dug her nails into his scalp and drew him down.

But not all the way down, as though she'd reconsidered or detected a need to use the bathroom first. He went ahead anyway. Progress. Her motions started. The energy rose for a minute but then it leveled, and then he felt it running off somewhere—water overflowing from a sink. Her hand left his head and he felt her body torque. Glancing up, he saw her stretch an arm out and reach behind some books stacked on her nightstand. He resumed his task.

He heard a whining noise, a high-speed grinding. It was steady at first but then turned choppy, pulsing. Between his lips and the surface he imagined as a melting scoop of French vanilla, something rigid intruded. It thrummed and buzzed.

"Stay down there. Be partners. Work with it," she said. "This isn't either-or. I want you both."

The device bumped his cheekbone, chattering his jaw. He moved his mouth aside to give it territory but it kept advancing and claiming more. Soon, the widening of time produced by the boozy mushroom tea became a scriptural chasm of agonies. Snapping to for a moment, he perceived that he was contributing nothing to the effort now—the locust invader had cast him to the side—yet she still seemed to want him down here, on her team. Teamwork. At Youth Horizons, it was everything. A man without a team, the program taught, was weak and doomed and to be pitied, but a young man alone was to be feared; he tended to grow into a menace. So get with it. Keep at it. Hum along. This droning misery can't go on forever. On Sunday mornings, certain hymns seemed endless, but then he'd turn the page and see that there was only one more verse. Knowing this, he sang more powerfully. Everyone did. They sang for their release.

"I scream, you scream," chants Lenny to the kids, who chant along with him as he moves his arms. He learned this by copying the boy. Then the boy stopped doing it. This is also what happened with the bananas. Lenny could slice them crosswise from the start, but only the boy knew how to slice them lengthwise. Then one day Lenny did it: banana halves. The boy took his knife away and put it somewhere. Then the boy left too. Lenny began to practice with a smaller knife. He sliced bananas into halves, then he learned to slice them into thirds, and then to shave them thin: banana curls. He learned on his own, by himself, without his teacher.

"We all scream for ice cream!"

The cherry boy.







Meet **Frank Bill**

a 'Working-class Writer Who Digs Trail Running, Powerlifting and Hound Dogs'

The novelist and Indiana native talks Trump, violence and being popular in France

BY BAIRD HARPER

PHOTO BY CHRISTIAN DOELLNER



Depending on what you read about him, Frank Bill is either a literary gut punch or just a regular guy who's into martial arts and powerlifting. Either way, encountering the author is a pretty muscular experience. His writing comes at you full speed and straight on, freighted with no small amount of discontent, violence and vengeance. But despite such thrilling high-intensity prose, Bill's characters are often grounded citizens who, under less duress, might've remained content to live out a quiet existence. They don't expect much from life, but when they are stripped of their livelihoods, family, dignity, they lash out in ways that can't be ignored.

This describes many of Frank Bill's characters, but in particular those of his short story *The Disgruntled Americans*, in which a group of brothers and cousins living in small-town Indiana take up arms against the establishment. For them, it's not about the money they steal or the victims they slay. It's about sending a "wake-up call. To everyone that's forgotten about independence." If America was once neatly united under the cause of shaking off the yoke of colonial rule, the modern America of *The Disgruntled Americans* renders a much smaller and darker rebellion that aims to shrug off the crushing influences of big business and apathetic government. "Dear Motherfuckers..." the story begins, and it only escalates from there.

My own correspondence with Frank was much more polite. He seems as grounded and reasonable as many of his characters might have wished to remain. Despite the popularity of his debut story collection *Crimes in Southern Indiana* and his 2013 novel *Donnybrook* (a movie adaptation of which is currently in development), he relayed to me a worldview largely unaffected by literary success. We spoke about his fear of boring prose, how he might've seen Donald Trump coming from a mile away and why the French love his take on the dark American underbelly.

PLAYBOY: You wrote *The Disgruntled Americans* two years ago—well before Donald Trump's election—yet the anger and resentment that define these characters are startlingly evocative of what many people now understand to be the president's hardcore base. Is it possible you knew Trump was going to win, while the rest of us were predicting a landslide defeat?

BILL: I had no idea that Trump was going to win. In all honesty, I try to stay away from politics and politicians. Not really my cup of tea or group of people. The media places a spin on everything; no one really knows what to believe half the time. I'm pretty much a middle-of-the-road guy. I try to look at both sides when it comes to class and people. I listen to the people around me and their conversations. The story I wrote has many layers, one being how out of touch America is with America. One group of people believes everything is going good—they're making money, living the consumerism lifestyle—while another group of people is struggling, watching everything they've worked for being given away. I've heard this from factory workers to schoolteachers—and even from our protectors in law enforcement and the military.

The story is also about how small towns have lost their simple existence: mom-and-pop shops are sometimes run

off by bigger corporations; a grocery store is replaced by a Walmart; a diner or restaurant is replaced by a fast food joint. I believe in supporting local businesses. Are they a little more expensive? Of course. But you gotta support your community. Two years ago, when I wrote *The Disgruntled Americans*, I felt a vibe from people. They were pretty unsettled with their jobs, the economy, immigration, fuel prices, the war on terror, racism, wages, taxes, drugs, gang violence. The list was and still is unending. And people carry those issues with them daily while trying to raise their families and live their lives.

PLAYBOY: This story goes to pains to describe why these native-born Americans commit a rather brutal act of domestic terrorism. To what degree do you want readers to sympathize with them?

BILL: You gotta have the why; otherwise it's not believable or even plausible. You gotta make your case; otherwise you're writing about violent people conducting violent acts without a purpose. One thing I tried to tap into was the vibe or the energy that was going on around me: people and their discontent. I did quite a bit of research on Timothy McVeigh, Eric Rudolph and the Weaver family from Ruby Ridge. I wanted to understand how people could commit violent and heinous acts. I also did research with law enforcement. Do I want readers to sympathize with the violence? No. Do I want readers to understand the characters' discontent with their jobs, society and daily life? Yes.

PLAYBOY: Each section opens with very deliberate language like "Cut to..." or "Flash back to..." as if the story might actually be under the omniscient influence of a filmmaker. What was the idea behind this?

BILL: I've written screenplays and comic books. I wanted a cinematic feel, where the action was in your face, as if you were viewing the words through a camera. But also as a writer I wanted to experiment with style and form.

"I wanted to understand how people could commit violent and heinous acts."

PLAYBOY: A review of your novel *Donnybrook* described it as “a literary shotgun blast to the face.” How did you become interested in writing about violence?

BILL: I want my writing to be in your face. I want words. I want action. My biggest worry is writing boring prose. To me, what I write—it’s no different than listening to your local news station. There’s always shootings, drugs, home invasions and a host of other crimes long before the sports and weather. I grew up around stories, and within those stories there was an act of violence involved. It’s just life. I also grew up hunting and training in martial arts and watching plenty of American and foreign horror, drama and action films. That all influences what I write about.

PLAYBOY: Writing physical action is difficult. How do you keep yours from sounding lame and mechanical?

BILL: I rely upon realism and body mechanics, how a person carries themselves and how they react in situations where movement is required. Boxing, martial arts and powerlifting probably help me with the visualization, then it’s about putting everything into words.

PLAYBOY: I heard a story that, as a younger writer, you once tried to apply to an MFA program, but without the requisite undergraduate degree in hand. What kind of education do you think writers need?

BILL: I spoke with someone at Spalding University twice. Basically before I was published and then after I had been published. Shot down both times. To me, the best education is life experience. Get a job. Meet and work with people. Understand struggle, survival. What makes a person tick. Their vices. Get out of the house. Get your hands dirty. Feel some pain. Help other people. The simplicity of every story is the same: a beginning, a middle and an end. It’s how we tell the story that differs.

PLAYBOY: In a speech you gave in France in 2013, you described waking up at four A.M. to write before going to your day job. Does having a real job inform your writing process?

BILL: Yes. I’m around people every day, and we talk about life. Our jobs, our families. What’s going on in the world. The music we listen to. Sports. Movies. Dogs. Books.

PLAYBOY: So the French are into Frank Bill?

BILL: They seem to be, which is weird for me. Being a regular guy, it’s odd traveling to a foreign country and encountering people who want a picture with you or to have a book signed.

"Regardless of demographics, struggle and survival are all the same actions and language."

PLAYBOY: But seriously, I’ve been to Paris and I’ve been to southern Indiana. Do you think there’s a common denominator in your work that reaches across such stark cultural and geographic differences?

BILL: I believe so. Regardless of demographics, struggle and survival are all the same actions and language. Others who’ve lived with the issues and actions I’ve written about can identify with them.

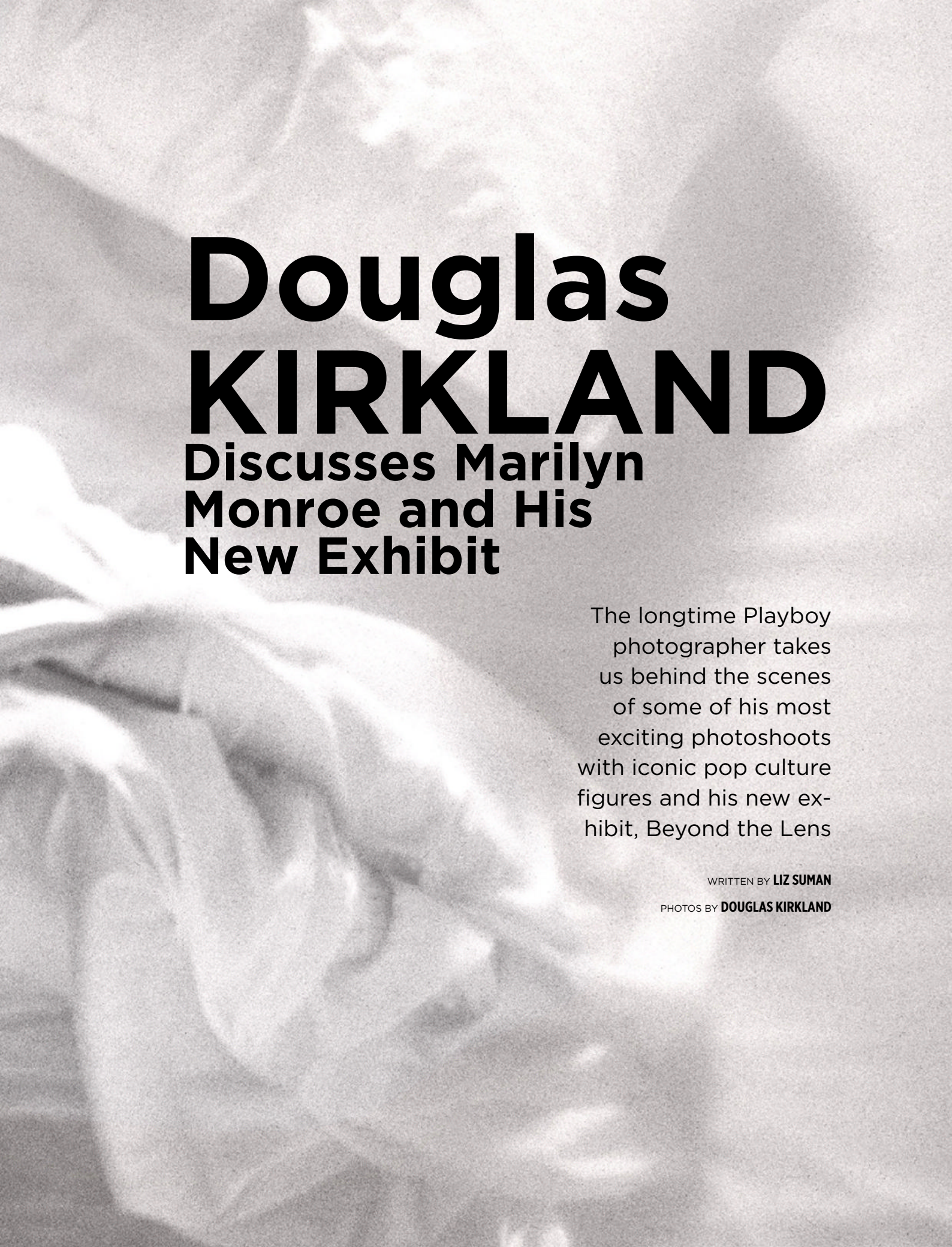
PLAYBOY: Like many of your stories, *The Disgruntled Americans* has a rather violent ending. Are there times when you write an ending and think, No, this is too dark?

BILL: No. I think as a writer you have to push your boundaries. If you don’t do that, you’ll never grow or mature as a writer.

PLAYBOY: There’s a video linked to your FSG author website showing you giving a literary Q&A in a body shop in Indianapolis. A different person might’ve come off as a hipster pretender trying that sort of thing, but I thought you looked rather comfortable. Do you find there are any difficulties balancing your rural Midwestern identity with the whole literary author thing?

BILL: No. You have to be yourself. I don’t pretend to be something that I’m not. I’m a working-class writer who digs trail running, powerlifting and hound dogs. I love my wife and parents, and I’m thankful for the rich upbringing and morals they offered me. I don’t carry the weight of the world on my shoulders, but I do write about struggling and surviving in the world.





Douglas KIRKLAND

Discusses Marilyn Monroe and His New Exhibit

The longtime Playboy photographer takes us behind the scenes of some of his most exciting photoshoots with iconic pop culture figures and his new exhibit, *Beyond the Lens*

WRITTEN BY **LIZ SUMAN**

PHOTOS BY **DOUGLAS KIRKLAND**

On a rainy November night in 1961, a young and green Canadian photographer named Douglas Kirkland found himself in a Hollywood studio with nothing but his camera, a bottle of Dom and the most famous woman in the world. The shoot, which one of Kirkland's earliest assignments, resulted in some of the most arresting images ever taken of Marilyn Monroe, who posed for Kirkland the year before she died.

The photos, which feature a giddy, sun-kissed Marilyn wrapped in a white silk sheet, have endured ever since, most recently in Kirkland's new exhibit *Beyond the Lens*, opening tonight in Los Angeles.

The show is a tour de force retrospective of Kirkland's 50-year-career, which, in addition to photographing timeless icons, from Brigitte Bardot, Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren, to Leonardo DiCaprio, Michael Jackson and Andy Warhol, has included nearly a dozen film and fashion editorial assignments for *PLAYBOY*. Kirkland's relationship with the magazine began with a 1965 fire-and-ice-themed pictorial of French ingénue Jeanne Moreau, "the brooding, beguiling high priestess of French cinemactresses," as the magazine described the star. Then, in 1975, Kirkland shot Margot Kidder, three years before the actress-writer-director catapulted to stardom for her depiction of Lois Lane opposite Christopher Reeve's Superman. After the shoot, Kidder described the photos, which were taken on a beach near her Malibu home, as "the prettiest ever taken of me."

Kirkland sat down with *PLAYBOY* in anticipation of his new show, which features photographs of Audrey Hepburn, Jack Nicholson, Sidney Poitier, Meryl Streep, Cher, Leonard DiCaprio and Kate Winslet and countless others, to talk about photographing iconic women, working for *PLAYBOY* at the height of the sexual revolution, and what really went down in that room with Marilyn.

Because this is *PLAYBOY*, and because you've photographed so many classic beauties, talk a little about what's so special about shooting women compared to other subjects.

I like all photography, but frankly and in simple terms, I am very drawn to beautiful women. If I'm sitting face-to-face with a beautiful woman, I'll probably be melting. That's the way I was with Marilyn, and that's the way I was with my wife, Francoise, who I met in Paris more than 50 years ago. I've had the opportunity to shoot some incredible women—Meryl Streep, Elizabeth Taylor, Angelina Jolie, Cher, Brigitte Bardot, Jeanne Moreau—as well as some men who I got along

very well with—Robert De Niro, Richard Burton, Peter O'Toole. I've had the chance to work on more than 200 movies through the years, and that's how I connected with so many different people, both women and men.

How did you begin shooting for *PLAYBOY*?

I knew the photography director, Mark Kauffman. I worked mainly with Mark and West Coast photography editor Marilyn Grabowski. Mark had been a photographer at *Life* magazine, where I had worked. When Mark got over to *PLAYBOY*, he invited me to come in and do some shoots. I didn't go to the extreme that some of the photographers did, but I knew beautiful women and I would respond to her and we would obviously get images that Hugh Hefner seemed to like. I went to the mansion a few times. It was quite extraordinary for me as a young man to be there and see it. And then I photographed there on a couple of occasions.

You did some of your earliest work for the magazine in the mid-1960s and the 1970s. What was it like to work for Hugh Hefner in the middle of the sexual revolution?

You know, in some ways it was strange, because I was married to Francoise, to whom I'm very happily married to this day, and here I was getting these assignments where people were comfortable removing their clothing. It was a different time. There was sexual freedom. You know, the Pill had come along. That doesn't seem like anything big today, but back then, it

“*So there I was alone with Marilyn Monroe, in a room with a bed and white silk sheets with Frank Sinatra records playing.*”

suddenly meant that women had control over whether they would get pregnant from having sex. It was a very free period.

Talk about your night with Marilyn.

My night with Marilyn. It was a rainy evening in November. The year was 1961. I was a very young photographer for *Look*, which was a very big magazine at the time, with a circulation of eight million. The magazine wanted to do something special for its 25th anniversary, and had the idea of Marilyn. Marilyn was the superstar of all time. She was probably at the height of her career. I came out to California from *Look*'s offices in New York. I stayed at a suite at the Chateau Marmont, and *Look*'s editor Jack Hamilton and the magazine's bureau chief and I went to see Marilyn at her new home in Hollywood. She had been sick for a few months, and she wasn't anxious for people to know where she lived. She said people had been more or less haunting her. The first time I talked with her I felt in over my head. Here I am, a young guy from a small Canadian town of 7,000 people. I walked in, and she had only two chairs in the room. My colleagues, who were much older than me, immediately took the chairs, and so Marilyn said, "Oh, just have a seat here on the bed with me. I usually think of this as a couch," and she slapped it and more or less giggled in a very wonderful way. We sat down and she started to talk, and she made it very easy. She had seen some of my work, and we talked about the last time she had been in the magazine; what we should do for the shoot. Eventually, she said, "I know what we need. All we need is a bed with white silk sheets and Dom Perignon champagne, and I will do the rest." "And Frank Sinatra records," she added. And that was the end of our first evening.

What do you remember most about the shoot itself?

We rented a studio in Hollywood, and I had the bed and the white silk sheets and the Dom Perignon champagne and the Frank Sinatra records all lined up and working. Marilyn was a couple of hours late, which she was famous for. I started to wonder if she was even going to show up. She finally did, and she had one lady with her with some wardrobe. I started taking pictures, but it wasn't working at first because I was nervous. Then she said, "I know what we need. I need to be alone with this boy. I find it usually works better that way." So there I was alone with Marilyn Monroe in a room with a bed and white silk sheets and Frank Sinatra records playing, and not much else. We started



working and the pictures immediately got really good. And that was the beginning of the evening that resulted in the pictures that were instrumental in starting my photography career in Hollywood. I was nervous, but she made it easy.

How did she respond to the photos?

We took the pictures around midnight on a Friday night and she wanted to see them the next day. I had the film processed first thing the next morning and went to see her that Saturday at 5pm. I rang her doorbell and she didn't respond. I rang it a second and third time. Suddenly Marilyn appeared in half-darkness. She looked like she hadn't slept. "Come on in," she said. She looked through 60 or 70 of the pictures, and at first she didn't like anything that she saw. Then she left for a few minutes, came back, and said, "Let me look again." After she looked the second time, she fell in love with them. She started to select the ones that she liked and pointing out how great they were, which was quite a switch.

What's one of your most memorable shoots, other than Marilyn?

Elizabeth Taylor was always very important to me. She really was the person who got me started. Like with Marilyn, I came out to Los Angeles from my *Look* magazine home in New York to meet Elizabeth. She hadn't been photographed for almost a year, because she'd been ill after one of the failed attempts to make *Cleopatra*. The shoot was a great success and what led to working with many people, a list that astonishes me when I see it even to this day.



The Long Leash of Sexual Liberty



BY **DR. DREW PINSKY**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **TREY WRIGHT**



Over the past 50 years, Western culture has seen unprecedented progress in our sense of ourselves as sexual beings. The so-called sexual revolution, with its rejection of puritanical values and embrace of “free love,” enriched our ability to be open about our sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual practices with vastly reduced shame and judgment. But the unintended consequences of this revolution continue to unfold in a dazzling array of manifestations—among them teen pregnancy, internet pornography, Tinder, sexual addiction, epidemics of sexually

transmitted diseases and a frequently impoverished interpersonal landscape.

We enjoy unprecedented—if incomplete—freedom in our sex lives. Dr. Drew Pinsky examines the hidden biological boundaries that surround our most intimate choices

As a physician, I’m always alert to the biological contexts of cultural change. At least some of the attitudes about sexuality that we’ve transmitted across generations have a basis in biological reality. A good deal of ink has been spilled suggesting it was the

advent of hormonal contraceptives (a.k.a. the pill) that allowed women to have mastery over their reproductive potential. And one must remember that throughout human history, a significant percentage of women died in childbirth. When obstetric and medical advances decreased this threat, sex was uncoupled from reproduction for the first time. This certainly contributed to the freedom we’ve enjoyed since.

But other rarely addressed phenomena have also influenced our freedom of sexual expression. Foremost, I suggest, is the invention of antibiotics. Throughout human history the medical consequences of sexual contact were protean and dire. Prior to antibiotic treatment, even something as simple as a urinary tract infection came with the hazard of serious medical complications, even death. Gonorrhea, chlamydia and syphilis were virtually untreatable. Knowing well the intensity of libidinous desires, you can imagine that if you were the parent of young adults in a pre-antibiotic era, you would be sure to instill in your children a healthy fear of sexual contact. Their lives would be at stake.

We now largely enjoy freedom from the complications of these infections when properly treated, and our sexual mores have evolved in a new biological context. I’m not suggesting that cultural attitudes don’t also restrain us; I am suggesting that those attitudes may have had biological roots that modern medical science has upended, allowing for a new range of freedom of expression.

Another important consideration is the very nature of freedom itself. Increasingly, neurobiological insights are calling into question precisely what we mean by free will. Freedom, as our founding fathers conceived it, was freedom from external oppression, freedom from tyranny, freedom to pursue our life’s work unencumbered by arbitrary restraint. Gradually, we have expanded our sense of freedom to include the freedom implied by equality and choice. These are complex topics, and I don’t mean

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Freedom, as our founding fathers conceived it, was freedom from external oppression, freedom from tyranny, freedom to pursue our life’s work...Gradually, we have expanded our sense of freedom to include the freedom implied by equality and choice.”

to reduce them to empty shibboleths. But I do wish to mention that our free will is at a minimum influenced, if not completely constrained, by neurobiological forces well outside of consciousness. Functional MRI data show that our brain makes choices and drives behavior long before consulting consciousness. Still, though we are undoubtedly under the influence of many biological forces, we have moments of relative choice; in other words, we can make choices somewhat freely, but the desires behind these choices are not under our control. You can choose to eat pizza every day, but you cannot will yourself to love pizza.

From my decades of clinical experience, I know that many processes can shape or adulterate our sexuality and thus our genuine freedom of expression. Childhood trauma has a profound effect on our adult sexual desires and behaviors. We are loath to admit it, but it is simply a feature of the human experience that traumatic experiences in childhood often lead to traumatic reenactments in our adult lives. We end up becoming attracted to individuals and circumstances that recapitulate our childhood experiences. This is deeply entrenched in our biology. Reducing the dangers of pregnancy and removing many of the complications of bacterial STIs have made it easier to detect this compulsion to repeat. When you see people making the same “mistakes” over and over again, look for trauma.

As with most realities of the human experience, the law of unintended consequences always lurks near at hand when there is change. Our sexual freedoms have undoubtedly enhanced many aspects of intimacy. I do not mean to diminish the benefits of being able to more easily assert one’s sexual preferences. And I am not Pollyannaish about work yet to be done to help further free those who feel the sting of sexual repression. I do, however, believe we should take an honest inventory of the forces that brought us here and continue to examine the phenomena that come to bear on our freedoms of sexuality and desire. The human experience is rich with revelations—many of them hiding behind the veil of the unexamined life.

Dr. Drew Pinsky is a practicing physician and addiction specialist whose call-in show Love-line was on the air for more than 30 years.







Char Borley

Talks Love, Sex & xTakeMe!

Instagram @charborley









Char Borley, the Vice President of xTakeMe, entrepreneur, model, and content creator, welcome! Can you tell us a bit about yourself? I am a content creator, I love to be watched and I adore performing, but I also love love love my job with xTakeMe and am so proud to be a part of it. I'm also a big foodie, I adore a good red wine and my life also consists of owning seven fur babies, that I love with all my heart.

What's one thing about yourself that your fans might be surprised to learn? Im extremely hard-working, I am a workaholic! I don't stop! But I love to relax too, I love a pamper day.

If you could choose one word to describe yourself, what would it be, and why? Naughty.... (but nice - I don't bite).

How would you describe your personal style, and how has it evolved over the years? My style is usually relaxed, I love the finer things in life, but who doesn't? My favorite outfit is usually one that consists of very little clothing.

What are your go-to fashion and beauty essentials for a day of shooting or travel? Always my favorite to go to Crem de la Mer, plenty of SPF, and a fan and I always like to take a visor or a hat to cover my face from the rays.



Could you share some of your top travel tips for your followers? I am a big foodie, so I always plan in advance and search for the best restaurants and their reviews before I go. I also like to look for perfect locations on my trips to take those saucy snaps you may see online.

What are your favorite ways to unwind and relax when you're not working or traveling? If I could have a massage every day, I would. To unwind I love a massage, a hot bubble bath, or some self-love in the bedroom. We have to look after ourselves and pleasuring ourselves has been said to decrease stress levels.



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Are there any particular hobbies or interests outside of your work that you're passionate about? I am a big sports fan. I love to watch boxing, rugby and football. Football and sports news are always on my TV at home. But I also enjoy a lazy day watching a cheesy rom-com, eating snacks, and just doing nothing. My life can be incredibly busy so sometimes my hobbies simply involve doing nothing... pure bliss.

What's the most memorable date you've ever been on, and what made it stand out? The best date I ever had was actually a shopping trip. My date bought me a lovely gift, which was not necessary, but I do adore generosity. But the date

quickly turned into a day walking around Italian wine bars trying to find the best red wine.... which ended up with plenty of wine, plenty of bread and olives, and an evening and a few days spent between the sheets.

Can you share any exciting upcoming projects or collaborations you're involved in? Yes! I'm so so excited for everyone to see what xTakeMe is all about!! I'm so excited about all the new video releases and taking everything to the next level!! it's going to be INSANE.

If you had to give your followers one piece of advice for leading a stylish and fulfilling life, what would it be? Health and happiness

never let anyone ever jeopardize either. Stay strong in yourself and your beliefs. I learned that one the hard way, never work to please others, always please yourself first and I most certainly do... in many ways haha.

Thanks so much for your time, Where can our readers follow you on social media to stay updated on what you're up to? On my Instagram @char.borley, Youtube.com @charborley and Twitter @charborley









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Playboy Fiction

The Domestic Lives of Super- heroes

Pete's wife can read minds...it's
hard for him to stay out of trouble

BY JOHN HORNOR JACOBS

PHOTO BY ZAIDI RAZAK/
SHUTTERSTOCK

"If you could have any superpower," she says, resting her hand on his chest and curling his chest hair, "what would it be?" She's a journalist through and through, Pete thinks. Even in bed. All the times before when they had played this game, it was as a prelude to another bout, another frenzied round of lovemaking. She'd grab his cock and he'd say, "Always be hard," in hopes of hardening.

But today, on the pallet of sheets and blankets they made on the floor of the one safe and shielded room in the universe, he says, "If I could have any power, it would be to take away superpowers."

"What, like steal them?" she says.

"No. Take them away. Forever." From where he rests, spent, he looks at the blank face of the ceiling, its dull black surface made of alloys and elements he cannot even begin to fathom. A bower constructed of alien material to hide a wife's private hours, her secret thoughts—and deeds. "Create a world where all men are equal," he says. He doesn't mean for it to come out sullen.

"Men?" She removes her hand from his chest and stands, nude. "Is this about Chris?" She looks around, a reflexive habit, checking to see if anyone is watching. Outside of the "blackbox," it is possible. Her husband, Chris, the leader of the League of Heroes, can hear any heartbeat anywhere in the world, peer through walls, see through flesh. He can translocate—can travel anywhere—almost as fast as thought. But not in the blackbox. It is shielded. Liza insisted on it when they moved in. She needed her privacy, her sanctuary.

Pete rises with her, pulls on jeans and buckles his belt. He slips on worn loafers and stands before her, shirtless. He's not heavily muscled or especially handsome. His body has a compactness, a dense angularity that hers does not, even though he stands no taller than she does. She is foam and he is wood. She captures but cannot hold him.

He buttons his shirt, taking his time to make sure he gets each one. It's a white shirt, rumpled slightly from their first embrace, its sharp lines and starched collar softened from the heat of their coupling—in the act, moisture sloughed off into the air to dampen everything contained in the blackbox. Condensation beads on the metal walls.

His dressing angers her. In their previous trysts he'd lounged about unclothed, watching her dress. She'd liked that, he thought, his unabashed nakedness. She enjoyed his willingness to be vulnerable in a way he sensed but could not explain. Once before, after having sex, she'd dressed, put on her pumps and then placed her heel on his privates. A light pressure intimating more. The sentiment was clear: She could unman him, destroy him. Pete simply watched her, giving nothing back, his head cradled on crossed arms, his red chest and pubic hair blazing, and smiled at the sensation of cold leather on his most assailable part.

But today she's angry. "This thing between us," she says. "It's just a thing. It's not for real. I will never leave Chris."

Pete looks at Liza, the soft roundness of her face, her long neck. He closes his eyes. A sweat drop had hung from the tip of his nose as he crashed into her open body, falling in the hollow of her throat as he came. It was her hair that first drew him. Long, black. A stark contrast to his red. Lustrous, as the television commercials said. He'd imagined how it might fall toward the small of her back. How it would move.

"I don't want you to leave Chris," Pete says, observing her face. "The Scourge is still out there. The world needs Chris—the world needs the Blade—and he doesn't need to be distracted by you." He turns to go. "Or me." He pats his pockets, checking to see if he has all his things: phone, wallet, keys. The fastidiousness of adultery. "Show me the leaking faucet, Liza," he says. "You know, the reason I'm here? I'll take care of it before I go."

They call it Hind Park, where the League of Heroes make their homes, keep their families safe. He doesn't think on Hind Park much—tries not to think on it—or the fact that he is his wife Vivian's greatest weakness. Sometimes he misses his parents, and his home of North Carolina: baseball games, barbecues at the park, kayaking the Nantahala and Chattooga, hiking the Appalachian Trail. The Scourge took that life, that history, away from Pete—his parents, his brothers and sister, all gone, targeted one by one, held for ransom and then killed. The League worked hard to save them but for all its extranatural power, for all its near-godlike technology, was stymied at every turn. The Scourge outmaneuvered and overmastered them.

Pete doesn't know where exactly Hind Park is, and he's been here for seven years now. Abstractly, he understands he is here to keep the world safe from the Scourge and his minions, so his wife in her official League persona of Mesmera is not compromised. For those with great power, love is vulnerability. More intimately, he knows Hind Park as home now. It feels like Michigan, maybe, judging by the blueberries at the edges of Miller's Field, or the copse of maple and beech trees standing like sentinels beyond, at the foot

***They call him Rock—
fall. He can manip-
ulate any mineral to
his will.***

of the Wall. The winters are cold and bring heavy snow; just last December Sylvester Childress in mere seconds raised his hands and grimaced, shaping the earth into a hill for sledding. Springs are temperate and the summers are mild. Had Pete a better mind, more suited to science, he might be able to discern his location by the movement of the stars. But his hands are rough and suited for woodwork and maintenance. And, most recently, the care of children.

It's fall now and Pete walks down Arbor Lane toward the market square. The oaks have turned yellow and orange and begun giving up their leaves. Acorns crunch under his feet. There's a store at the nexus of streets, a grocery. A library and beyond, protruding from the Wall, the school. If you ignored the electric face of the Wall and the air-defense missile turrets and oscillating radar antennae, it could be any town in America. The houses are large and well-appointed, midcentury modern, colonial, Tudor. Each has a wide expanse of lawn, manicured gardens. Swimming pools and Jacuzzis to unwind in after long days of airborne combat and crime-quashing in the cities. Of the hundred homes, most are empty.

In the square, a soldier in civilian garb unloads boxes from a refrigerated truck. When Pete and Vivian first moved to Hind Park, soldiers were everywhere, but the uniforms and guns bothered the community's kids, and so they changed protocol.

Pete trots up and pitches in, placing boxes of pork chops and fish fillets, oranges and heads of lettuce, crates of milk and juice, on the dolly. They go inside. The market is empty, bright fluorescent lights shining on full blast above untended rows of canned goods and other groceries. He doesn't know the soldier, but it doesn't matter. They cart the frozen goods to the meat freezers.

"I've got this," Pete says to the soldier, waving him off. "Something for me to do."

The soldier chuckles. "You're married to one of the League, huh? Which one?"

Pete shrugs. "Mesmera."

The soldier gives a faux shiver. "Holy smokes. You must be a saint. If my wife could read my thoughts, there'd be hell to pay."

Pete says, "It keeps me honest." He pulls out his phone and sends a group text: Meat delivery is here. Nice chops. Some salmon. Lemme know what you want and I'll have it wrapped and waiting for you at the market. A few League responses return immediately. Salmon! from Beth. Any steaks left from Sunday, bro? Chris sends. Brandi Childress responds: Six chops and some brats 4 kids, please! And can you walk M&M home for me? We'll be back at 4.

He answers each, dutifully, staring at the glowing face of his phone. When he looks up, the soldier has returned to the truck. Pete spends some time packaging and labeling the meat orders and placing them in a glass-front cooler. When all are in place, he collects the chops and spinach for

his family's evening meal, bags them, claims a potted orchid—a white phalaenopsis—and wanders back out into the street. He checks his phone again for the time.

At the school, he sits on a bench and waits. There are two parts to the school in Hind Park—the section extending outside the Wall for kids who have not yet "bloomed," or shown extra-natural abilities, and the inner area for the rest of them.

Pete's son, Hank, barrels out of the school's front door, whooping and swinging his backpack. A good sign—like his mother, Hank is prone to dark moods. Vivian tells Pete that their son exhibits telepathic hallmarks. Precognition, empathic senses, second sight. He'll be moving to school inside the Wall soon. Bryce and Lizzie follow their older brother. The eight-year-old twins have a complicated relationship; it's thought that they share a consciousness. To what end, what powers, Pete could not say.

He ruffles Hank's hair and scoops up the twins and swings them about.

"You've been with Mrs. Blade," Lizzie says.

"She's pretty," Bryce says.

"That she is," Pete says. He doesn't bother correcting them on her last name. "How was school?"

"We won," they say together.

"The coding competition?"

"Yes. It was simple," they say.

"One voice at a time, kiddos," Pete says.

"It was an app that took in information and wrote to a database," Lizzie says. Bryce's mouth moves sympathetically.

"Hey! That'll be handy," Pete says. He waves to Marcus and Mykaela, Brandi and Sylvester Childress's kids. Mykaela runs to Pete in the adorable, ungainly manner children have. Marcus strolls over, giving Pete a high five. He smiles and the younger kids join hands. "You guys have everything?" Pete asks. "Ell-ee-tee-ess gee-oh."

They accompany the Childress kids to their house. Sylvester and Brandi aren't home yet, so Pete leads them inside. There are no locked doors in Hind Park. Pete makes peanut butter and jelly on crackers for a snack. Even though the leaves are changing, it's warm enough to swim, so the kids put on suits and jump in. Marcus is 13 and can breathe underwater and create riptides, so Pete is content to leave the kids long enough to find a suit. He moves through their house, up the stairs on thick carpet, down silent halls. He enters Sylvester and Brandi's bedroom and stops, look

ing at the bed. Then he enters the walk-in closet and opens drawers until he finds a swimsuit. He strips and changes and returns downstairs, his clothes neatly folded under his arm. Using the long pool skimmer, he removes the elm leaves from the surface of the water before jumping in. Pete scores the twins' dives—7.2, 7.8, 8.3—tosses Hank into the air to squeals of laughter and wrestles with Marcus underwater until he has to tap out for breath.

Pete leans into the pool's wall, arms outstretched, watching the children splash, when Sylvester and Brandi show up, smiling.

"Hey, Pete!" Brandi says. "Thanks for getting the kids."

"No problem. Didn't have much else to do."

"Uh, man, you in your underwear?" Sylvester asks.

Pete shrugs. "Nope. I borrowed some of your trunks." He looks down at his water-distorted waistline. "Little big on me, though."

Sylvester looks puzzled and glances at Brandi. Sylvester's thick ropey muscles cord his arms, heavy neck and shoulders. They call him Rockfall, and Vivian told Pete that when he was given that call sign, he shrugged and said, "Sounds about right." He can manipulate any mineral to his will.

A look passes between husband and wife and there's some irritation on Brandi's part, Pete is sure.

"I put the chops and brats in the fridge," Pete says. Sylvester goes inside. Brandi follows her husband but returns in minutes wearing a one-piece that flatters her muscular physique. She's carrying three beers and places one near Pete's head before lowering herself into the pool near him.

"You're pushing it," she says. "Sylvester is very touchy about his stuff. Too many brothers and sisters."

Pete takes a long swallow. "Ahh. I was an only child," he says. "It was an open landscape with me a lone figure. A Heathcliff on the open plain."

"It's the moors, Pete. If you're a landscape, it's not an open plain," she says. "That's for damn sure. More like a cow pasture, you're so full of shit."

"Me?" Pete says. He raises his eyebrows, smiles and takes a pull from his beer.

"I've read your dossier," Brandi says. "You've got brothers and a sister."

"I have no brothers and sisters now," Pete says.

She has something on the tip of her tongue but reconsiders, closes her mouth and spreads out one of her arms and sinks down, wetting her hair, her breasts peeking above the surface.

***He sweeps his
hands along her
thighs and nestles
into her backside.***

No one talks about the losses, the failures.

Pete places one wet finger on her hand. There was nothing there, nothing in the touch. Except for one night years ago, a Christmas night, when everyone had gathered at Greason's house for eggnog and drinks. Vivian was called away to the command center; later he would learn the Scourge had found his parents only hours before. Christmas carols droned on until Beth Meyer, at her wits' end, cried "No more Burl Ives!" and hijacked the stereo. "Let's get this party started," she said, and went to kiss her wife as Al Green began to play. Everyone laughed. Sylvester and Greason chatted in the kitchen with the Guerins, and Brandi, hips swaying, had taken Pete's hand and tugged him into dance. He had had enough scotch to be extremely conscious of her body, the heat pouring from her. The heat was mirrored in him. With one glance downward, she knew. She did not pull away.

But now, she withdraws her hand and stands.

"Word is, a new couple will be moving in," Brandi says. She finishes her beer and begins drinking the extra. Sylvester will have to get his own. "They're calling her Plasmacoil and him Doctor Helios, which is kind of histrionic, in my opinion."

Pete smiles. "They could use a good editor. Just Helios would be fine. God of the sun. He shoot lasers or something?"

"No idea," she says. "Mesmera—I'm sorry, Pete, I mean Vivian—is inducting them now."

"So she'll be late." He sighs. "Kids?"

"Almost. She's got one in the oven."

"That's good." Pete falls silent. Brandi watches him.

"Don't get any ideas," she says.

"What are you talking about?"

"You can act like you don't know," she says. She looks inside and then back to Pete. "There's always talk at the League Hall."

"Some things never change," he says and pushes himself out of the water. "People talk. Even superheroes. Thanks for the beer. Tell Sylvester I'll bring his trunks by in the morning." He turns to the pool. "Kids!"

Pete's house is a modern colonial, the most traditional in Hind Park and the oldest. The Captain lived here, from the late 1950s to the mid-1970s, before the Syndicate—the organization that gave rise to the Scourge—managed to push him into the Nth Dimension. To remind Pete of this, a portrait of the Captain stares out from above the mantel, painted by none other than J.O. Buckley. It has been appraised for more than the house. As if the house could ever be sold.

Pete showers and changes into athletic shorts and a Chapel Hill tee. At the dining room table, he helps Hank with his algebra homework—Bryce and Lizzie are better at most abstract subjects than Pete,

but his son refuses to be tutored by his younger sisters—and then they play a quick game of Ping-Pong in the garage. Pete's current project—a massive white-cedar canoe kit—dominates the space. There are no cars in Hind Park, so Pete cannot understand why there is a garage. However, Hind Park has streets too, so maybe at one time it was meant to be part of the world, not locked away like the Captain in the Nth Dimension. Most of the League members can fly. Greason, the League's administrator, once offered Pete a golf cart. "So, what you're giving me is a glorified wheelchair?" Pete had said. "I can get a Muggle tattoo, as well. How's that?" Greason had stammered and blushed while Vivian made outraged expressions at her husband.

Pete sautés the spinach in butter and garlic and brines the chops. He makes risotto for Hank, who has a gluten issue that leads to eczema, and pesto noodles for the twins. He drinks another beer as he starts the grill. On the patio, he watches the elms and oaks shift in the dusk, follows the passing clouds lit by the sun, already past the rim of earth. He watches geese on high, flying south through blue-gray twilight skies, the halls of play of the League, and Pete's wife, but never for him. He will not be carried. Leaves fall, and one of Beth Meyer's golden retrievers barks hoarsely into the failing light. Inside, he serves the kids dinner and reads them books (though they're all very capable readers) and bundles them into bed with kisses, taking their phones and iPads as he goes.

"Will Mommy be home soon?"

"Of course," he says.

"Will you send her in to kiss us?"

"Of course I will," he says.

He picks up laundry and turns off lights. He starts a load and then pours a scotch and drinks it in bed, naked. When Vivian comes in, he sits up.

"Long day?"

She kisses him and wrinkles her nose at the smell of scotch. "Yes. New couple. Greason and I had to induct them. They're moving three houses down, in that monstrous old Tudor."

"So I heard from Sylvester and Brandi," he says. "Did you eat?"

"I had a smoothie."

She strips and he watches her. Vivian, the daughter of a doctor and the granddaughter of an Episcopal priest, a descendant of Puritans come to America for religious freedom. An air of aristocracy hangs about her, from her fine, patrician nose to her delicate jaw. There's an abundance to her, the lush curve of hip, the elegant arms, expressive hands. They met at college and it was Pete who discovered the talents of levitation, telepathy and mesmerism that she had been hiding. Pete who pushed her to contact the League. He had fallen underneath her abilities; he had succumbed, but never enough to not understand what was happening. She was what made him special; everything in her was rebounded by Pete, a sounding board, a mirror. Everything extraordinary about Vivian was matched by everything ordinary about Pete.

When she gets into bed, he sweeps his hands along her thighs and nestles into her backside.

Vivian says, "No, Pete. I'm so tired."

"Of course, hon."

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not. You've got a lot on your plate."

"You've got your hands full here too. The kids? How are they?"

"I told them you'd give them kisses when you got in."

"I did," she says. "I'm not that absent."

"They're good. Lizzie and Bryce won their coding competition." He pauses. "Do you want to read me? See how my day went?" There are two intimacies offered here—the second comes with so much more weight.

She turns in the circle of his arms and touches his face, his mouth. Her elegant, aristocratic fingers trace the flesh there. "Oh, Pete. There's so much going on and I just need sleep. The Scourge kidnapped a Belgian nuclear scientist and stole some spent plutonium rods. I've been scrying all day."

"Dirty bombs?" he says.

"Possibly." She kisses him. The comfort of the familiar reassures him and he feels as though he is falling into her. A raft lost on the sea of her body. He opens his mouth and their tongues meet. They make love without her reading him.

He forgets to tell her about the orchid before falling asleep.

In the night he wakes to the silent house, monochrome-dark and quiet. His wife snores softly, something Pete has always found charming. Outside, the radar antennae rotate constantly, sweeping the skies. The missile turrets pan and scope the heavens, ever vigilant.

He rises and goes downstairs.

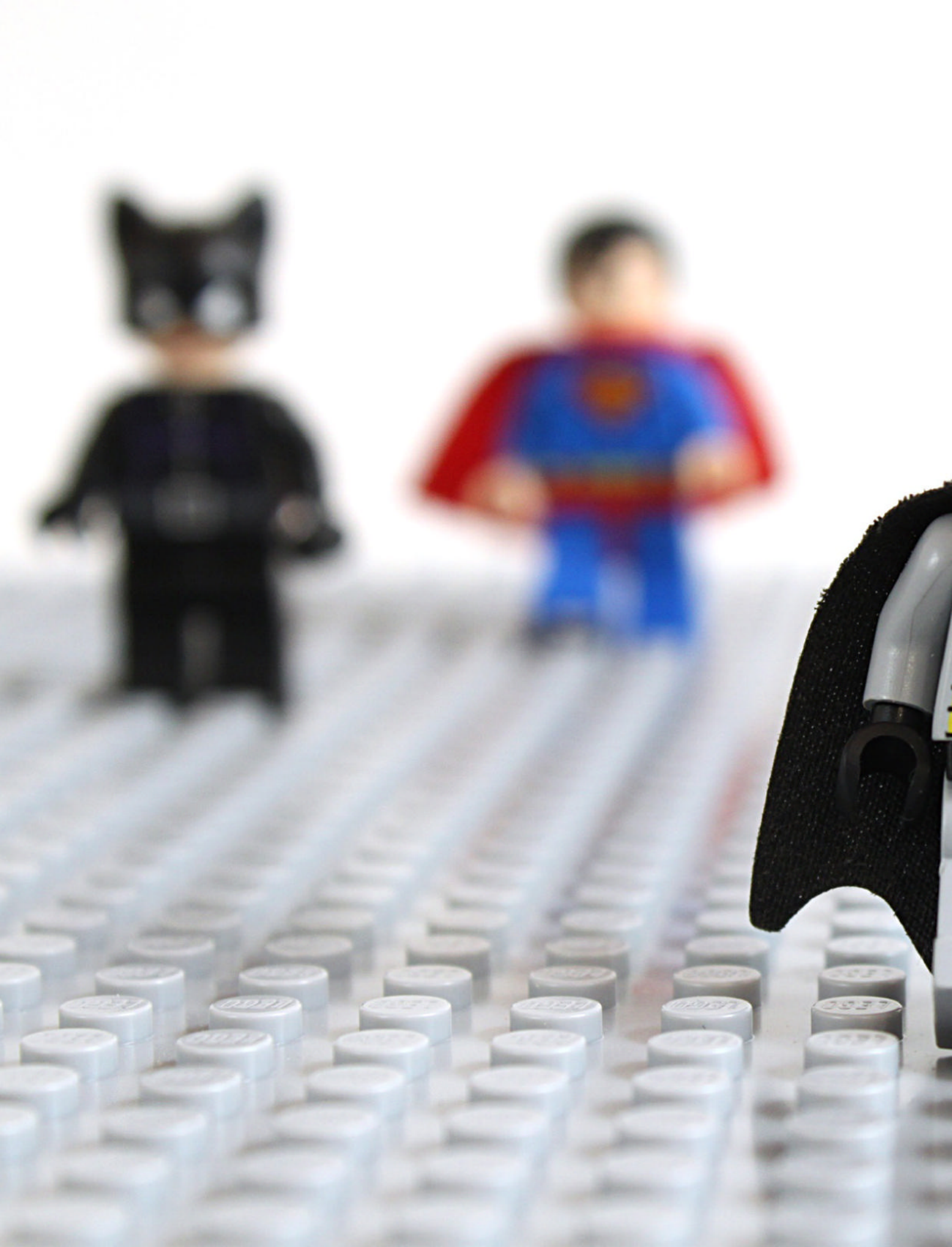
Naked, Pete pads through his home in Hind Park. The world sleeps around him. He opens the door by the kitchen and enters the garage. Here is the canoe Pete has made from white cedar. Taking up a fine-grain sandpaper wrapped around a wooden block, Pete begins sanding the tapered curve of the craft. Soon he will begin staining the canoe and then sealing it with fiberglass, and he will be dressed then. But for now it is just his hands moving across the fibers of cedar, the smell of it rising to his nostrils. Sawdust nestles in his leg hair, his crotch.

There is no open water in Hind Park.

Late in the afternoon that Saturday, Pete and Vivian dress casual—he in a camp shirt, faded jeans and loafers, she in a sundress with a light sweater tied around her waist. The kids wear bathing suits, towels slung over their shoulders. The sun shines, watery yellow, and the air blows mild with a hint of winter yet to come.

The party is for the Whitmans, the new arrivals to Hind Park. Pete and Vivian walk over, she with an air of distraction, repeatedly checking her phone. To Pete's questions, she gives half answers—"Things are happening; strange extranatural readings in Prague; AI gleaned spikes in coded surveillance"—but puts the device away as they near the Klerks'.

The Klerks'—the Blade and Liza Lynne's—door stands open, and Vivian and Pete walk in without knocking, move through the foyer into the big white kitchen and place their food alongside all the other offerings: broccoli salad, fruit salad, arugula salad





with vinaigrette, potato salad, twice-baked potatoes, kale chips, bagel chips, wedges of Gouda and Brie. Dimly Pete is aware that below him, in the basement, is the blackbox, now containing only possibilities.

A blender screams from the backyard. They walk out onto the Klerks' expansive patio to be hailed by many; Pete is more popular than Vivian, and the Guerins call him over to where they're playing badminton beyond the pool. Marcus and Mykaela wave, along with Beth and June's children. The grill smokes, perfuming the air with charcoal. There are the Little-smiths, the Childresses, and June and Beth.

"Here he is," Steve Guerin—Spitfire—says. "Hell on the court, Pete Salzburg." He tosses Pete a badminton racquet. Pete snatches it out of the air.

"I don't think it's a court," Mahrinda Guerin says. "It's a pitch. Hey, Pete." She air-kisses his cheeks. A normal, just like Pete, she's one of the few spouses along with Liza who have found gainful employment with the League. Mahrinda, having been raised between Bangalore and London, speaks seven languages and spends her days translating intelligence and acting as a communication liaison. She is not very good at badminton.

Chris appears before Pete with a displacement of air, wearing an apron. "Here, bro," he says and hands Pete a red Solo cup brimming with light green froth. "Too much tequila?" The Blade metabolizes alcohol differently than regular humans. Pete swallows some of the mixture. "You're right on the money, Chris," Pete says. Chris smiles and translocates back to the bar.

Brandi and Pete play the Guerins in a badminton match, sipping from their margaritas between points. In the air above the house a quartet of older kids plays an aggressive game of tag, occasionally punctuated by adults rising to intercede when tempers flare. Pete finishes his drink and walks over to where Liza stands near a tall blonde woman and an even taller man. The woman's belly bulges beneath her form-fitting dress.

Pete kisses Liza on the cheek, a familiarity allowed close friends. As hostess, Liza feels a pressing need to be everywhere at once and all things to all guests. It takes only a glance for Pete to know she's in a heightened state of politeness and formality. An empty drink or a bare plate is a fire to be extinguished. Two un-introduced guests, a travesty. "Pete, this is Dr. Jeff Whitman and his wife, Georgiana." Pete shakes hands with them both and looks over the taller man, wondering why his call sign is Doctor Helios.

"Hey, that's great, Doc. I think I've got a rash developing. Could you take a look?" Pete says.

Liza appears outraged, while Georgiana and Jeff laugh.

"Not exactly that kind of doctor. More along the lines of particle physics," Jeff says.

"Pete is our resident comedian and handyman," Liza says.

"That's my call sign," Pete adds. He spreads his hands as if outlining a vaudeville marquee. "The Handyman."

Liza's face darkens.

"Well, I'm Doctor Helios," Jeff says, spreading his hands in the same manner as Pete. "Though I thought prepping the call

sign with 'Doctor' a bit much."

Chris appears beside them. "But there's Hellion, and Herniac—that guy is totally fucked-up—plus Hesphatos and Hecate and a whole slew of similar-sounding call signs. You need brand compartmentalization."

Pete turns to Georgiana and says, "And you are...?"

"Pregnant, obviously," she responds.

Pete, caught off guard, stammers. The Whitmans, and especially Liza, laugh at his predicament. Chris gives a yelp—"Burgers!"—and disappears again.

"Your call sign is Plasmacoil? I don't know if I understand that."

Georgiana puts her hands on her stomach. She's a titan of a woman, towering and expansive. Her eyes are large for her face and her mouth is wide and generous. Pete cannot help but appraise her body. She's athletic and muscled, but her frame does not exhibit her strength in outward and coarse ways as with Brandi—biceps, triceps, quads, glutes, all bunched up and massive—nor can he see her reflected in the abundance of Vivian. She is unlike any woman he's ever encountered.

"We'll have to stay busy," Georgiana says, glancing at Jeff. She looks back to Pete as if to evaluate his true intentions. "This is easier when I'm pregnant," she says. She draws her palms away from her stomach, pulling threads and ribbons of pure energy. The air begins to crackle. In her hands she holds a pulsing ball of plasma, and within it Pete imagines he sees the electric ghost of an embryo. Georgiana rises into the air, just a few feet, her blonde hair splayed around her as if suspended underwater.

"I think I see," Pete says. Looking at her, Pete knows nothing is promised—not one day, not one

She's a titan of a woman, towering and expansive. Eyes large; mouth generous.

life. But here, contained in this crackling electric being, he can see mapless territories of love and pleasure. Love and pleasure enough for him too, maybe. Guilt had died in him when his parents and family died—a little spark, snuffed out. He had not missed it. But in Georgiana, the vastness of her body—more than her body, truly, for she seems limitless—he senses a counterweight to the empty part of himself. If he could gain her, he would swell, grow. The diminution would cease.

Jeff laughs. “She has that effect on me too,” he says. “She has that effect on everyone.”

“Pete,” Liza says, placing a hand on his elbow. “Can I talk to you for a sec?”

Pete looks at Jeff and Georgiana apologetically. “Pleasure to meet you both.” He lets Liza draw him away.

In the kitchen, she says, “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Liza, this is absurd. You introduced me to them. What do you think I was doing?”

“I’m not an idiot,” she says. She stops herself and looks out onto the patio. Chris is simultaneously grilling burgers, blending a margarita and tossing a Frisbee with the older children.

“He’s going to burn the burgers,” Pete says. “Maybe I should——”

“Shut up, Pete. Chris never fails at anything,” she says.

It takes a moment to restrain himself, but Pete does not mention his parents.

“Maybe we should discuss this in the blackbox,” Pete says. He places his hand on her hip. She allows it to remain for only a moment.

“Not now,” Liza says. Something in her hardens. “Not ever again.”

“All right,” he says, smiling. “We can talk about this later.”

“Never,” she says, her expression awful.

Pete walks back out onto the patio, surprised to find many faces already turned toward him. Chris stands still at the grill, burning the burgers, his infallible and penetrating awareness fully upon Pete. At the edges of his perception, Pete senses Vivian probing, a minnow wriggling into the net of his consciousness. The children quiet in their play—the pool stills, the teenagers wheeling in the arteries of air cease their movement and hover.

A keening sound begins, arcing across the vault of sky. A siren. Phones begin chirping, issuing alarms. Chris’s gaze lingers on Pete before he takes out his phone and disappears. The spatula falls to the ground.

The Scourge, again. This is what Hind Park was built for. Beth and June lift into the air, yelling at their kids to stay with the adults.

Vivian appears before him. “I——,” she begins and stops herself. “Get the kids home,” she says. “Helios and Plasma-coil, you can be more help here than out there. You haven’t had time——”

Jeff says, “Understood.” He takes Georgiana’s hand and leads her out to the front of the Klerks’ house, in the street. His

skin becomes mottled, emanating light. His clothes combust and fall away. He rises above the treeline, a newborn star. Georgiana conjures a plasma ball from her womb and carries it before her. “Come on, kids!”

“I’ll hang back too,” Brandi says to Vivian. “A full League member should stay.”

Vivian nods, not looking at Pete. “Good. Guard the Park.”

Steve Guerin gives the rallying cry of the League—“All as one!”—beckoning the flightless members to come close enough to touch. They converge, dropping cups and plates where they stand on the lush grass of Chris and Liza’s backyard. As one, they flash and disappear. Teens descend from the sky and gather up their younger siblings and usher them home.

Pete watches his wife rise into the air and arc away, her hair and clothes rippling with the speed of her exit. He stands on the lawn, among the litter of false suburbia, and begins picking up plates and cups. He takes the burgers off the grill and closes it. He stands there, charcoal smoke curling around the rim, burning his eyes, and stares toward the Wall, where the radar and turrets seem to whirl and turn ever faster.

“Come on, Pete,” Brandi says. “The kids will need us.”

He turns to gather his children, the twins and Hank. Marcus and Mykaela have them waiting and ready to go home. Pete enters Chris’s house and begins to call out for Liza, but Brandi places her hand on his arm.

“Haven’t you done enough?” Brandi says.

“Enough——”

“Goddamn you, Pete,” she says. “You’re a bigger threat than the Scourge.”

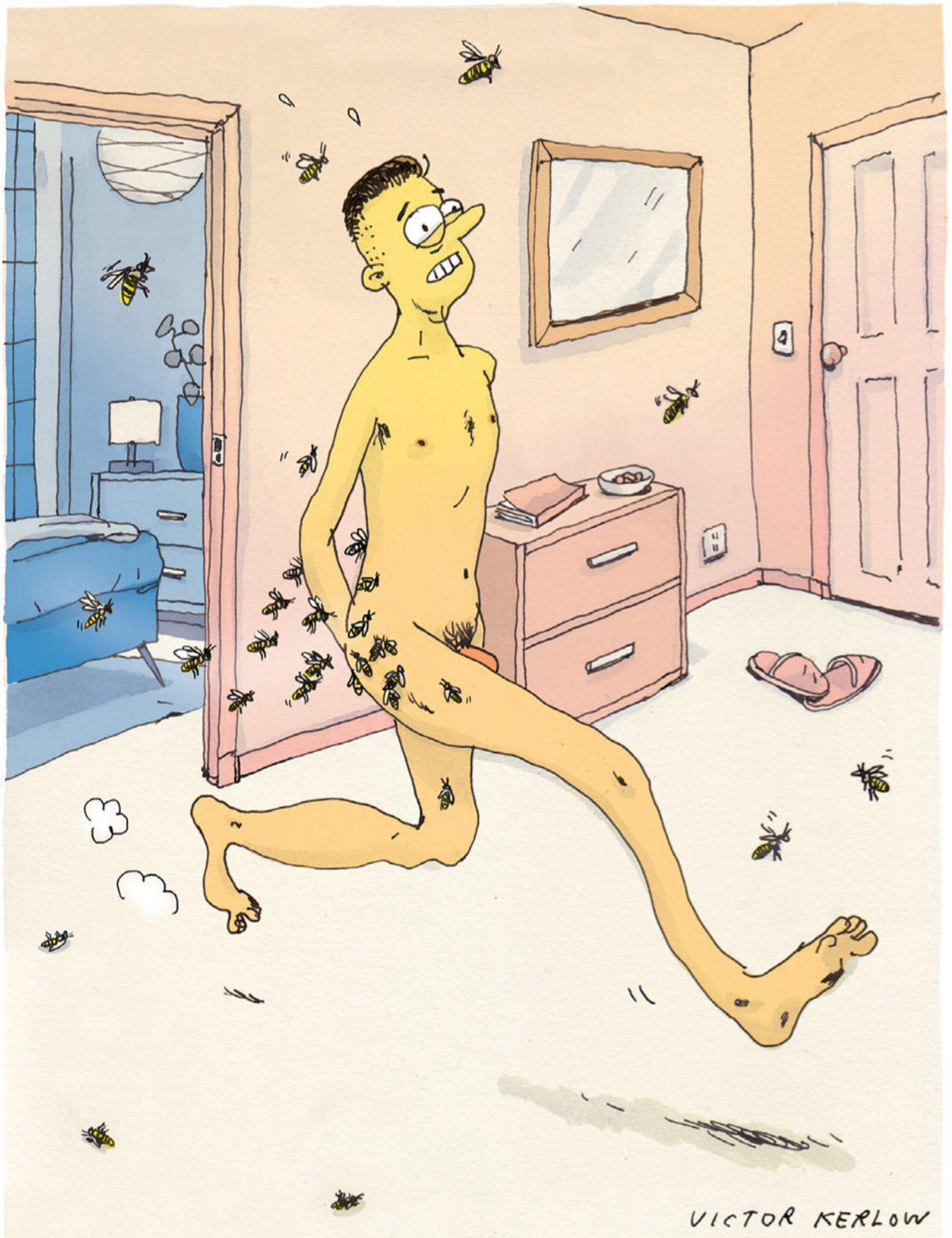
“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Brandi sets her shoulders. The air around her begins to warp and distend. Her displeasure is the open door of an oven. Incendia, they call her. “Every garden needs a snake. And you’re a fine one,” she says. “Cloaked in helplessness and vulnerability. You think Chris or Vivian is going to be totally focused on the Scourge? When you’re here at home?”

Pete laughs, but it doesn’t feel right, and his children wait for him. He tries to walk away. Her grip tightens on his arm, beginning to burn, stopping his forward movement.

“It’s true, then,” she says. “I always thought it was a cliché. But all villains think they’re the good guys.”

She leaves him standing in the white kitchen, staring after her, near the banquet table of food that will never be eaten.



"I thought you said anal beads!"



"Your kiss was well-aimed, Princess."



PLAYMATE

Sara Kova

Exotic Defined

Instagram @miss_saracha

MUA @bridgetzglam
Stylist @jbaileynyc









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PLAYMATE



Congratulations on your Playboy South Africa Cover! What does this mean to you? Honestly, I'm honored. Playboy has had the sexiest women to grace its cover and now I can say I have, as well.

What do you think of when it comes to Playboy and the iconic bunny? I think the brand as a whole is pure sex. Some of my favorite celebrities have posed for Playboy so it makes it more enticing.

Have you ever been to South Africa? Would you like to visit someday? No, I haven't but will be visiting sooner than later.

What is your favorite exercise workout? I love hiking because it connects me with nature and it's such a great overall workout.

What is your favorite body part on you? on him? on her? My favorite body part on me

is my lips. I definitely like a man with a great chest and arms. I love women with good proportions.

Where is the craziest place you've had sex? The craziest place I had sex was in a car.

Where is the craziest place you would want to have sex? I would want to have sex on a flight to pass the time.

Favorite sexual position? Me on top. I definitely like being in control.

Do you prefer to please or be pleased? I'd rather be pleased.

What is your sexual orientation? I'm definitely straight, although I think women are beautiful and sexy.

If you could eat just one food for the rest of your life, what would it be and why? I would have to go with pasta. For one it's delicious and secondly super filling so it would kill all my other cravings.

Netflix and chill or party all night? Definitely Netflix and chill.

Do you have any regrets in life? I have absolutely no regrets.

Who or what inspires you the most? I get inspired by women who are self-made. I love to hear that they thrived despite all odds against them.

If you could change any one thing in the world, what would it be and why? I would change the homelessness and hunger. I think everyone should have a place to live and no one should go to bed hungry.



ENTERTAINMENT FOR MEN

PLAYBOY

Behind the Cover: March 1968

A woman's face is partially visible at the top left, looking towards the camera. Her arm is extended, showing colorful body paint in shades of blue, yellow, green, and red. She is holding a thin, light-colored stick or pencil in her mouth and another in her hand, which is positioned near her arm. The background is solid black.

MARCH 1968 • 75 CENTS

BOY

A look inside
PLAYBOY's March
1968 issue

WRITTEN BY **LIZ SUMAN**

PHOTOS BY **DAVID CHAN & BILL ARSENAULT**

In March 1968, American airwaves broadcast the final episodes of *The Lucy Show*, *Batman* and *The Monkees*, the UCLA Bruins—led by junior center Kareem Abdul-Jabbar—set an NCAA Tournament record when they triumphed over the University of North Carolina Tar Heels and revolutionary civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was planning the Poor People's Campaign exactly one month before he was assassinated.

Although the societal backdrop was bitter-sweet, that month's issue of *PLAYBOY* offered plenty of bright spots. Between the covers of our March 1968 edition, readers discovered a wildly imaginative body paint-themed pictorial (before tattoos were de rigueur), a fascinating *Playboy* Interview with literary bon vivant Truman Capote and a sartorial soliloquy on the season's most covetable rainwear.

Read on to enjoy a visual tour of some of our favorite March moments, including some of the issue's greatest hits, as well as unpublished outtakes that didn't make it to the printer in 1968.

Behind the Cover



Previously unpublished outtakes from the March 1968 cover



Previously unpublished behind-the-scenes images from the issue's cover shoot.

Cover model Sharon Kristie appeared on multiple *PLAYBOY* covers, but her 1968 collaboration with Mario Casilli, the long-time staff photographer who painted the rainbow Rabbit Head on Kristie's back, "colors our memory most vividly," as *PLAYBOY* archivist Joey Coombe once artfully put it.



Spirit of the Sixties



BIRD WATCHER Nature lover by day, our chick is a night owl, too, and glad to have someone share her nest. But she decides Whoop.



PSYCHEDELIC HIPPIE When the ultimate hippie at far left does her thing, even the most literal-minded can grasp pop philosopher Marshall McLuhan's thought that the medium is the message



CAREER GIRL Our assistant account executive's form-fitting double-breasted jacket marks her as a winner in the fashion-conscious advertising game. But she's earned a reputation for stuffiness by breaking one of the game's rules: At freewheeling creative conferences, where shirt sleeves are de rigueur, she keeps her jacket on



TEACHER The painted pedagog above, though obviously with it, put down the joker who chalked "sex now" on her free-form blackboard.



SUN WORSHIPPER Beaches are best enjoyed when one's bare, of course, but some sort of covering is still required on the more populated stretches of the nation's shore lines. Our avant-garde beachnik's ultimate barekini at right solves this dilemma, granting freedom and placating prudery at the same time. The outfit's most fun when it's noncolorfast.



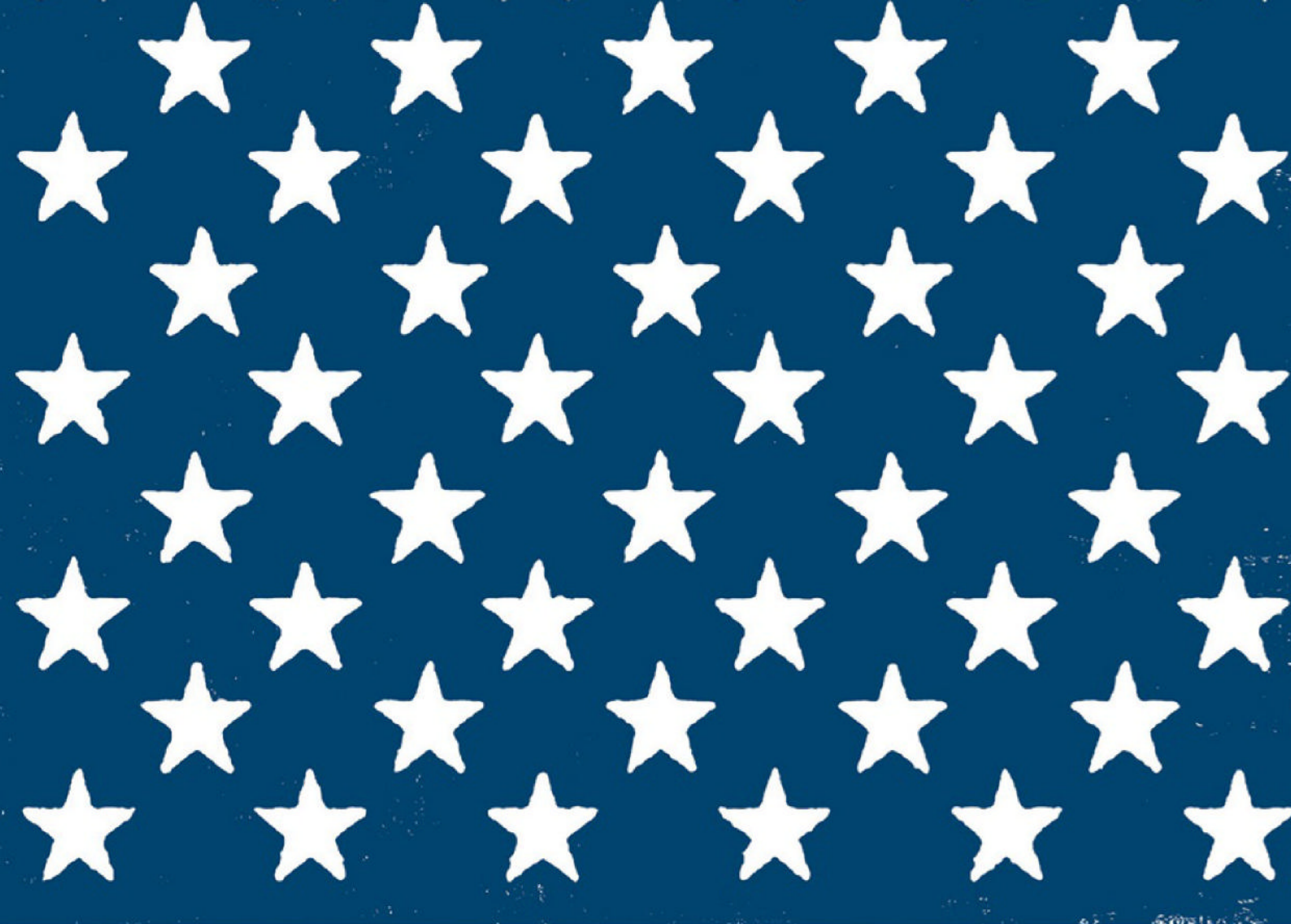
HITCHHIKER Insurance against being stranded in Kansas, according to this migratory bird, is the topographical map she calls "San Francisco, here I come."



FINANCIAL WHIZ The inflated aspects of our fiscal miss' economic picture make the threat of a shrinking dollar good news for lovers of legally tender species.



MUSICIAN Our cellist's bare Bach variation draws a bravo—especially for her use of a spirited spinal chord.



Among **the Atheists**





A former minister immerses himself in the American Atheists convention, bearing witness to the nonbeliever movement as it rises from the ashes of 2016

BY **J.W. HOLLAND**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **EDEL RODRIGUEZ**

Touching down at Will Rogers airport in Oklahoma City, I request a ride; within minutes a young woman named Sandra pulls up to take me to my hotel. Contemporary Christian music plays quietly from her radio, a cross hangs from the rearview and a Bible peeks out from the door pocket at my feet. I recognize Sandra, though not personally. Sandra is me several years ago, back when I was on a mission to save a world doomed to hell by any means necessary. Planting seeds, we called it.

What she doesn't know, and what I don't bother to tell her, is that I was ordained as a minister in the Southern Baptist Convention. Sandra might have admired me back when I was attending dinner parties with Judge Roy Moore and riding on Herman Cain's bus. Now she probably wouldn't be a fan. About six years ago, after a long stretch of mounting self-hate and force-fed guilt, I became an atheist. Today, Sandra's passenger is in town to attend the 2018 American Atheists National Convention.

I was raised to believe that Madalyn Murray O'Hair, founder of American Atheists and subject of the recent Netflix docudrama *The Most Hated Woman in America*, was

a drug-addled, devil-worshipping sex maniac. So I honestly have no idea what to expect at this convention except maybe drug-addled, sex-crazed devil-worshipping. Just a few years ago I might have been in the street, protesting such an event, and now I'm a registered attendee.

What a time to be alive.

I'm here, in part, to see how the atheist movement, the vanguard of the roughly 27 percent of Americans who identify as nonreligious, has changed since the election of Donald Trump. Does the president's overwhelming support from evangelical Christian voters stand to threaten the rights of nonbelievers and religious liberty itself? White evangelicals, according to the Pew Research Center, gave Trump 81 percent of their vote, at least three percent more than they gave any of the previous three Republican presidential nominees.

With his track record of rough language and sexual bravado and apparent zeal for most of the deadly sins, Trump does not immediately come across as the man for dedicated Christians. (He called the Bible his favorite book in a 2015 interview and then declined to identify a single verse.) Barack Obama was a professing Christian long before he entered the White House, and yet evangelicals by and large despised him. George W. Bush, a man of deep faith who shares the evangelical vision of a Second Coming, garnered nearly the same



Keynote speaker Hugh Laurie



Black Nonbelievers president Mandisa Thomas

base as Trump. If you disregard the possibility of this support having anything to do with sexism, racism, homophobia and xenophobia, it would take quite a bit of mental gymnastics to make sense of the current situation.

In a noisy banquet room being prepared for the American Atheists' awards dinner, I meet up with Alison Gill, the group's legal and policy director, and staff attorney Geoffrey Blackwell to get a better understanding of what they've seen in the past two years. Gill tells me that, on the bright side, "there has been a real resurging interest in the electoral process and government." Many activists, advocates and philanthropists want to be more involved than before; she cites a "new wave of people" who are interested in running for office.

Gill also admits, "At the federal level we've just seen a wave of negative changes that really impede the separation of government and religion, a far greater assault than we could have first suspected."

Blackwell says one of the most consequential issues he is seeing is "the appointment of very questionable judges to federal judgeships." The Obama administration struggled to fill these openings, but the current administration is working more efficiently to load them with "far-right religious conservatives who are really putting at risk a lot of the precedents that our current understanding of religious freedom depends on." Blackwell adds that Trump could end up appointing as many as 30 percent of those critical slots.

Gill points out that so far those confirmations include Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch and Seventh Circuit judge Amy Coney Barrett. Gorsuch authored the extremely conservative opinion *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby Stores, Inc.*, and Barrett, according to Gill, "was an academic who sought to advance the role of religion in interpreting certain legal rules and bodies of law."

So it comes as a surprise when Gill and Blackwell mention that American Atheists finds agreement among some religious organizations. It turns out the Johnson Amendment—the 1954 tax code provision that prohibits all 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations from endorsing or opposing political candidates—has detractors on both sides. More than 100 religious organizations from around the country signed a letter to Trump last August, asking him to protect the Johnson Amendment. "Churches all over the country don't want politics drawn into the sanctuary," Blackwell says. With their flocks shrinking, some religious leaders are apparently concerned with Trump's promises to repeal the amendment: "Why put churches in a position where they feel obligated to take a political position if they weren't already doing so?" Blackwell says. He adds that on several individual issues, including how nonprofits are treated by the IRS, churches and atheists stand together—"even if we disagree on the question of whether or not there is a deity."

Neda Bolourchi, a research associate at the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics at Columbia University, shares Blackwell's sentiments about finding common ground. Over e-mail she tells me that "there has been a confluence of support for the Johnson Amendment.... All of these have come together because they do not believe that religion is encumbered by this law, which has existed for over 50 years and been supported by both parties and all branches of government." Bolourchi believes the only groups that would oppose this law are those that see 501(c)(3) organizations as easy vessels to introduce nearly untraceable "dark money" into politics. With the 2010 Citizens United decision and the

The estimated number of nontheists makes them the largest voting group in the country.

financial floodgates it opened to campaign contributions, you can see a problem here: Millions of churches in America could become individual political action committees funded by virtually anonymous donors. Not only is that a problem for fair elections; it could also lead to compromised control over local religious bodies.

While much of the convention was focused on fighting what its organizers view as the current threats to the separation of church and state, an almost equal amount of time was spent examining the steps atheists must take to claim an equal place in American society. The next day I meet with David Silverman, president of American Atheists, in the speakers' green room. Less than two weeks after the close of the convention, Silverman will be fired after a brief investigation into sexual and financial misconduct. In a statement on his Facebook page, he will write (and then delete), "I categorically deny any wrongdoing, legally or ethically." But here at the convention, Silverman is focused on a different upheaval.

"I think what we have seen over the past couple of years is a terrible depression on behalf of most of the American Atheists movement," he says. President Obama had an open-door policy with religious and nonreligious leaders alike, even favorably mentioning the latter in his second inaugural address: "We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and nonbelievers." To date, Trump has refused to meet with the nontheistic community. "We went from a very high place to a very low place," Silverman says. "We weren't ready for that defeat."

But this is a convention, not a wake, and Silverman makes a point that will echo many times throughout the weekend—a point that ironically reminds me of religious groups that faced skepticism at best and bigotry at worst before entering the American mainstream. "I think we have seen the bottom," he says. "This convention will be used to elevate the rest of the movement. If we come out and stop hiding behind euphemisms like agnostic or humanist, if we actually call ourselves atheists, we will be able to take our place at society's table almost immediately."

With more than 850 attendees and a celebrity keynote speaker—House star Hugh Laurie—American Atheists appears to be taking its message on a more mainstream path than ever before. As I stand in the back of the ballroom, I can't help noticing the attentiveness of the crowd. The room is packed but hushed. I don't remember ever seeing a gathering this engaged for this length of time, even back in my days as a minister. The applause seems genuine, with the occasional standing ovation; none of it comes across as forced.

From the start of the convention, there has been an electric



Comedian Victor Harris Jr.

ity in the air. In every corner of the hotel, I see attendees in deep conversation about everything from politics to sexuality. I find myself sharing personal information that many in my own family don't know, and I sense no judgment. It occurs to me that I have never been this at ease with any other group of people in my life.

Multiple speakers extol the size of the country's atheist voting bloc: The estimated number of nontheists, even on the modest end, makes them the largest voting group in the country. A 2016 Pew poll identified 20 percent of voters as white Evangelicals, while 21 percent held no religion—a whopping seven percent increase since 2008. Add that to a recent University of Kentucky study that shows as many as 26 percent of the population may be atheists, and you begin to see the potential influence of an organized nonreligious community. As Silverman suggested in our conversation, the issue among this group is not size but vis-

ibility. To harness our considerable potential, atheists must be more outspoken about our beliefs, or lack thereof.

Perhaps that emergence is already under way. Atheists are finding modest success in areas previously unthinkable: In Tennessee, Gayle Jordan, the executive director of Recovering From Religion, an organization that helps people deal with the repercussions of leaving their faith, ran for state senate, gaining around 30 percent of the vote in a deep red and highly religious district. Jordan tells me during the convention that her democratic supporters “were mostly religious people, and I ran as an out and open atheist.” Shockingly, she was also able to garner the support of many among the state's Tea Party. Faced with the choice between “an unethical Christian Republican or an ethical Democratic atheist,” Jordan tells me it was remarkable to see the voters of her district support her. Remarkable indeed, considering the results of the 2016 presidential elections. But when you

consider the right's almost three decades of attacks on Hillary Clinton's character, it becomes clearer how evangelical voters were able to justify voting for Trump.

The most encouraging moment of the weekend comes when I introduce myself to Mandisa Thomas, president and founder of Black Nonbelievers, an organization dedicated to support and visibility for black atheists. Thomas, who was raised nonreligious, tells me that black nonbelievers often think they're the only ones in what are traditionally heavily religious areas: "To say that you're an atheist in the black community is almost like you're trying to reject your race." The reality, she says, is that with wildly disproportionate levels of violence, poverty and disease afflicting so many black communities, thoughts and prayers aren't going to cut it.

"You have to say enough is enough," she tells me. "At what point is praying or going to church going to resolve that? At what point are you going to start thinking for yourself and putting more evidence-based measures into place?"

That, in a nutshell, is what I take away from the convention: If you want things to change, you have to change them. Of course many religious organizations do great things for society, but those things often come with strings attached. Nonbelievers have the power to do good without the promise or threat of an omnipotent being.

I would like to say atheists have cornered the market on character, but Silverman's messy departure from the organization just days after the convention serves as a reminder: No group is free of human error or frailty. Still, the work goes on. At the end of the convention—Easter Sunday, as it happens—organizers and volunteers purchase, pack and donate 30,000 meals for needy families in the area. Hundreds of atheists, including Dr. House, work shoulder to shoulder in a hotel ballroom. I leave for my ride back to the airport more encouraged than I've felt in years—not just in atheists but in humankind as a whole. One ideology doesn't control the narrative for acts of kindness; it's the responsibility of us all.

After that weekend in Oklahoma City, I feel empowered to parrot the sentiment of Hugh Laurie, who told a packed ballroom, "I stand before you a proud atheist."

If I ever see Sandra again, I'm going to tell her.







FIERCE AND UNAPOLOGETIC

Ms.V Victoria Skye

Instagram [@ms_v_modeling](#)

Photography by **J. Luzan** | [@tropicpic](#)
& **Jamie Gant** | [@jamie_gant_photography](#)
Editing **Viktoriia Trofimova** | [@i.and.mine](#)
HMUA **Evgenya Vitcova** | [@evgenyapromakeup](#)
Designers **Corset** [@tavi.art_](#)
Wings [@homespunheartprops](#)
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We're happy to have you featured. Can you give our readers a bit of background on your career as a model and where it all started? Thank you, it's a thrill to appear on the cover of Playboy for the 6th time. You guys are spoiling me! My journey began back in Europe under the sun-kissed skies, where I was discovered on a sultry summer afternoon. The camera loved me from the start, and I soon found myself gracing the pages of magazines and walking runways around the world. Every photo, every step, has been a celebration of passion and beauty.

How do you usually begin your day? I work late hours, so my day starts late. I stretch in silk sheets and check my social media and emails, followed by a refreshing dip in my pool. I love feeling the midday sun burning on my skin. Then, it's a steamy shower and a strong espresso, setting the tone for a day of adventure and allure.

If you could spend a day doing anything you wanted, what would it be and why? I'd spend the day on a private yacht in the Mediterranean, indulging in the ultimate escape. Picture a secluded island, turquoise waters, and soft, white sands. With no agenda but to bask in the sun, sip on exotic cocktails, and lose myself in the magic of the moment. With a lover by my side, it becomes even more enchanting gentle touches, passionate kisses under the sun, and creating unforgettable memories together. We could enjoy a romantic dinner for two on the yacht or stroll hand-in-hand to a nearby restaurant with authentic cuisine for an intimate meal. It's all about embracing the beauty of life, the thrill of spontaneity, and the joy of being with someone special.

What are your favorite ways to unwind and relax when you're not working or traveling? A luxurious

bubble bath with flickering candles and soft music playing is what I find relaxing. Alternatively, there's nothing quite like a sensual massage or cuddling up and engaging in intimate conversations with my partner.

Do you have any hidden talent, if so what is it? I do have a hidden talent! I'm quite a DIY enthusiast. Whether it's making accessories, sewing my own outfits, creating content, or doing photography, I love it all. Decorating and renovating my spaces, even tiling floors or walls really excites me. There's something incredibly satisfying about working with my hands and bringing my creative visions to life. Transforming everyday items into unique pieces of art allows me to express my creativity and add a personal touch to everything around me.

3 things that you can't go a day without. A spritz of my favorite perfume, leaving a trail of allure wherever I go. My journal, where I capture fleeting moments of inspiration. And a touch of mystery after all, what's life without a bit of intrigue?

Looking back, what advice would you give to your younger self? Embrace every moment, and every experience, as they shape the masterpiece of your life. While I can praise myself for it, I'd still advise my younger self: Don't rush; savor the journey, and enjoy each moment.

Are there any qualities or traits you find particularly attractive in a partner and what do you value the most? I find intelligence ut-



terly irresistible, especially when paired with a sense of adventure and a touch of vulnerability. A partner who can challenge my mind, ignite my senses, and keep up with my playful spirit. Someone who isn't afraid to dive deep into meaningful conversations that's what captivates me the most.

That said, what advice would you give to all the women out there when it comes to love and relationships? Love yourself first, fiercely and unapologetically, just as you love your partner neither more nor less. Be open to passion, yet guard your heart with wisdom. Remember, true love is a dance of equals, where both partners lead and follow in perfect harmony.





A collection of various pills and capsules is arranged on a metallic, reflective surface. The items include a white round tablet with a score line, a blue oval capsule, a yellow oval capsule, a green and blue capsule, a red and blue capsule, a brown textured round tablet, an orange oval tablet, a light blue round tablet, a magenta round tablet, and a white round tablet. The lighting creates strong shadows and highlights the metallic texture of the surface.

Ending the American Pill Epidemic



Drug overdoses—more than 60 percent of which involve opioids—are the number one cause of accidental death in America. Dr. Sanjay Gupta wants us to ask ourselves: How did we get here, and how do we kick the habit?

BY **DR. SANJAY GUPTA**

PHOTO BY **KEIRNAN MONAGHAN AND THEO VAMVOUNAKIS**

Right around the time I was finishing my neurosurgery residency in 2000, the consumption of prescription pain pills, known as opioid analgesics, was growing at a staggering rate. Over the next decade, sales of these medications would quadruple and the United States would earn the dubious honor of becoming the most pain-medicated country in the world.

With less than five percent of the planet's population, we were consuming 80 percent of its opioids and 99 percent of its hydrocodone by the year 2010. In the wake of these pain-pill prescriptions came lethal overdoses—one every 19 minutes on average. By 2014, overdoses—61 percent of which involved opioids—were overtaking traffic fatalities as the number one cause of accidental death in the U.S. It was an American epidemic, and it was fully man-made.

“

Nearly 40 percent of all Americans over the age of 65 take five or more medications, and every American fills 12 prescriptions a year on average.”

We got here on a winding road paved with good intentions, as well as downright greedy ones. One thing is certain: There's plenty of blame to go around.

Our culture has become frighteningly accustomed to “a pill for every ill.” Nearly 40 percent of all Americans over the age of 65 take five or more medications, and every American fills 12 prescriptions a year on average. Far too many of them are for pain pills.

Of course, many patients suffering chronic pain will read this and wince, worried that it represents another attempt to rob them of relief. That's not my intent. But pain pills weren't expected to be effective long-term, with most scientific studies lasting only three to four months. Additionally, most of my patients understand the concept of hyperalgesia: Sustained use of pain pills can make certain patients more sensitive to pain. As one escalates the doses, the hyperalgesia intensifies, as does the risk of overdose. The pain pills don't just become less effective; they can actually make things worse.

If that's the case, you may wonder, why do doctors prescribe so many of these pills? The charitable answer is that most doctors don't like saying no to their patients. The vast majority of my colleagues derive tremendous satisfaction from helping people, and doling out pills is sometimes part of that. The more typical reason, though, is likely that it's easier to write a prescription than to spend the time finding effective alternatives.

And then there's the tremendous cultural shift that took place in medicine during my surgical training, between 1993 and 2000. At first, I was taught to reserve opioid analgesics for three very specific indications: postoperative pain, cancer-related pain and pain at the end of life. Even in the field of neurosurgery, where we treat many pain-related disorders, we were taught to prescribe much more physical therapy and far fewer opioid analgesics. Over the years, I saw an increasing number of pharmaceutical advertisements in medical journals and guidelines from the American Pain Society—which is funded by pharmaceutical companies—making the case that long-term use of narcotics was safe for an ever-growing range of conditions.



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Dr. Sanjay Gupta, a practicing neurosurgeon, is CNN’s chief medical correspondent.



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